



# What is antisemitism?

---

By Ben Rich

**Religion Media Centre**

Collaboration House, 77-79 Charlotte Street, London W1T 4LP |

[info@religionmediacentre.org.uk](mailto:info@religionmediacentre.org.uk)

Charity registration number: 1169562



## Different types of antisemitism

- Antisemitism, simply put, is prejudice against Jews based on race, nationality, religion or culture. Present-day antisemitism has several strands: the hard left, the far-right and extreme political Islamism, as well as more traditional forms of religious antisemitism.

## ANTISEMITIC STEROTYPES

- Antisemitism often relies on age-old prejudices that depict Jews as greedy, uncaring, power-hungry, hook-nosed and so on. These are known as antisemitic tropes, all of which were frequently used in Nazi holocaust propaganda. Among the most common is the claim that there is some powerful “Jewish conspiracy” controlling politics, business, finance, and the media or world events.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- In the most transparent and absurd cases, antisemites ascribe to a wide variety of conspiracy theories, such as the assertion that Jews use the blood of Christian babies to make unleavened bread (matzah), were behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks , or are simultaneous controlling left-wing and right-wing governments across the globe.

## CODED LEXICON

- Where explicit antisemitism is less acceptable, we see implicit “nods and winks” to the prejudices above, such as irrelevant references to people’s religion, which play to these prejudices, such as the supposed Jewishness of those convicted in the Guinness scandal in the late 1980s. Alternatively, negative stereotypes might be used to describe somebody Jewish – as in the case of the investor and philanthropist George Soros or the men in the artist Mear One’s mural in Spitalfields – without a direct reference to their Judaism.
- Indeed, antisemites have developed a new lexicon substituting the word “Jew” or “Israelite” or “Hebrew” or “Zionist”. Terms such as “rootless cosmopolitans”, “international financiers”, “globalists” or even “New Yorkers” have been used instead of “Jews”. In these cases, the context is everything.

## HOLOCAUST DENIAL

- Another prevalent form of antisemitism is to seek to justify the Holocaust, or deny its existence, or diminish it in some other way. Holocaust denial is rarely total but questions the numbers, the role of the Jews, and their complicity in their own destruction. It might take the form of suggesting Jews are “obsessed” by the Holocaust or use/exaggerate it to “justify” Israeli policies, its creation, or the general mistreatment of others.

## ANTISEMITISM AND ANTI-ZIONISM

- The most complex area is where Israelis or Zionists – rather than Jews per se – are apparently the subjects of criticism. It is not antisemitic to criticise the government or policies of Israel, but there are important red lines and caveats (see the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition below). Nevertheless, in some cases “Zionist” is simply used instead of “Jew” and the reader needs to ask whether the statement really does apply to those who support a Jewish homeland, or whether it is actually a comment on Jews as a whole, often utilising the stereotypes above.
- The use of “Zio” as an abbreviation of “Zionist” is derogatory and was coined to be so, and so can always be regarded as antisemitic.

## Level of antisemitism in the UK

### GENERAL ATTACKS

- The Community Security Trust (CST) is a Jewish communal body that monitors and records antisemitic attacks in the UK, as well as seeking to prevent them. There has been an increase in attacks in recent years, although very few are physical in nature. In 2018, there were 1,414 reported antisemitic attacks in the UK. See the [CST website](#) for further information.

## PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

- In the 1990s, bombs were placed outside Jewish communal buildings and the Israel Embassy in the UK. Perceived Jewish targets are now fitted with bomb-proof windows and metal detectors and visible security guards, paid for in part by a £13.4m government grant. The physical security measures are paid by the community itself – usually through CST’s Security Enhancement Project, which seeks to match fund the costs of security improvements with communities. Attacks on Jewish targets in Britain in recent years have been limited to vandalism, daubing with swastikas, and cemetery desecrations.
- The same, however, is sadly not true on the Continent. Over the past couple of years, terrorists have attacked Jewish targets in Belgium and France: the Jewish Museum in Brussels, a Jewish school in Toulouse and a kosher supermarket in Paris. Similarly in Copenhagen in 2015 a volunteer security guard was shot dead while protecting a bar mitzvah inside a synagogue.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

- The sharing of traditional antisemitic tropes is becoming more frequent on social media. In 2018 CST published a report, Hidden Hate, which explores people’s use of Google, specifying that 170,000 searches are made every year in the UK that contain antisemitic terminology, 10% of which contain violent language or intentions.
- While the theories and ideas covered here tended to belong to extremist philosophies on the political fringes both in Britain and the United States, the language of antisemitism is increasingly becoming mainstream through social media. Jewish MPs and others who have been involved in Labour’s antisemitism row have been on the receiving end of thousands of abusive tweets, many of which have been antisemitic, leading to hundreds of individual investigations by the party.

## Antisemitism defined

- The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (2016) [states](#):

*“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.”*

- Alongside this definition are “11 contemporary examples of antisemitism” that seek to help users determine whether a particular expression is acceptable or not: The examples are:
  - Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.
  - Making mendacious, dehumanising, demonising, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective – such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.
  - Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.
  - Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (eg gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during the Second World War (the Holocaust).
  - 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, eg, by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour.
  - Applying double standards by requiring of it a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.

- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (eg, claims of Jews killing Jesus, or blood libel) to characterise Israel or Israelis.
  - Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
  - Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.
- The IHRA definition was an offshoot of one created in 2005 by the European Union’s Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia. When EU directives changed the role of the agency, it no longer promoted the definition, and the IHRA adopted it as its own. Although the IHRA definition is not legally binding either in EU or UK law it is currently used along with its examples by 31 countries and by the Crown Prosecution Service, the police and all the main British political parties.
  - The IHRA definition came to the fore over the summer of 2018, after a dispute over whether it should be adopted (in full or part) by the Labour Party. In particular, Labour’s National Executive Committee (NEC) initially rejected the examples, arguing that they risked inhibiting legitimate criticism of Israel and free speech. In September, 2018, the NEC accepted the definition and examples in full. It added a caveat: “This does not in any way undermine the freedom of expression on Israel and the rights of Palestinians.”

## Antisemitism v anti-Zionism

- Zionism is the belief in the right of Jews to self-determination to a national homeland in Israel although it is frequently wrongly understood to imply support for the Israeli government, its policies or actions.
- According to a 2015 survey of the UK Jewish community by the [Institute of Jewish Policy Research](#) (JPR), four-fifths of respondents see Israel as playing a central or important role in their Jewish identities, so it is unsurprising that they may feel attacked when Israel is criticised.
- Given this misunderstanding as to the meaning of Zionism, it is inevitable that some who might describe themselves as anti-Zionists may mean no more than that they oppose West Bank settlements or the continued occupation of the West Bank or the Gaza blockade or other Israeli government policies. And yet many Jews who would describe themselves as progressive Zionists, might also share identical views. To this extent, for some, this is therefore a semantic error, which can be easily avoided.

- To be truly anti-Zionist means to oppose the very right of Israel to exist. The Labour NEC's concern about adopting the IHRA definition in full related to the inclusion within its examples of "claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour". While there is little doubt that many who would subscribe to this view would not regard themselves as antisemitic, it generally involves applying different standards to Israel's continued existence from those applied to other nation states.
- For a fuller explanation of this distinction, see the [Fathom Journal website](#).

## Historical perspective

- Anti-Jewish prejudice can be traced back to the ancient world where Jews were the target of attack simply for being different. This greatly increased after the rise of Christianity, which cast Jews as "Christ killers".
- During the Crusades, the prejudice worsened with many European Jews forced to wear identification badges and cone-shaped hats, pay extra taxes and, from 1215, they had to live in ghettos. Many were massacred. The worst pogroms – riots against Jews, often condoned by the state – were built upon the ideas of the "blood libel", that Jews killed Christian children to make matzah at Passover. Jews were expelled en masse from several countries: England (1290), France, Provence and Spain (1492) not returning to Britain until the 1650s.
- In the 1700 and 1800s, there were frequent attempts to legalise the Jewish presence in England, leading to the Jews Relief Act of 1858 that allowed Jews to stand for parliament without taking the Christian oath. Moves towards religious tolerance and emancipation overcame resistance, including expressions of antisemitism, and led to a period of tolerance, allowing migration from Eastern Europe.
- In 19th-century Europe, in parallel with increasing civil and political emancipation, antisemitism was becoming more racial and political in nature. In France, Colonel Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French Army, was falsely accused of spying for Prussia and towards the end of the century antisemitic political parties were formed in Germany, France, and Austria, precursors to Nazism. A growth in nationalism across Europe, coupled to insecurity based on the treatment of Jews across the continent, led to the revival of Zionism at the end of the 19th century, the desire that Jews should have their own nation state in their historic and religious homeland of Palestine.

- Millions of Jews lived in the Russian Empire: they were restricted to the Pale of Settlement – a western area including Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Moldova, parts of eastern Latvia and eastern Poland – until the 19th century. They also faced discrimination and, from the 1880s, pogroms. The Tsarist authorities faked a notorious antisemitic text, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which claimed to be minutes of a meeting of Jews trying to take over the world. It continues to be widely used even today, even though it was exposed as a forgery by The Times of London in 1921.
- Building on such sentiments and the huge resentment at the terms of the end of the First World War, Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 on the explicitly antisemitic platform that ended in the Final Solution: the systematic murder of more than six million Jews.
- In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviet Union supported the establishment of the state of Israel. But by the 1960s it had developed a doctrine of anti-Zionism, reviving classic antisemitic tracts and tropes, as the Cold War played out in the Middle East with Israel, America’s ally. By the 1970s – and particular after the Yom Kippur War in 1973 – this approach was also widely adopted by many hard-left groups in Britain.

## Islamist antisemitism

- European-style antisemitism was not an issue in the Arab or Muslim world, but antisemitic ideas flowed into the Arab world from fascist and Nazi sources. Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, was an ally and guest of Hitler during the Second World War. After war, materials such as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion were translated into Arabic and disseminated by pan-Arab nationalist states in conflict with the Jewish state. Traditional European antisemitic tropes became more common. These were adopted by Sayyid Qubt, the Egyptian father of the Muslim Brotherhood and for the many the father of modern Islamism. The 1979 Iranian Revolution saw Khomeinism take root in Persia: its mix of Marxism and Shia Islamism brought with it certain anti-Zionist attitudes that in turn included antisemitic tropes.



## A note on spelling

- The spelling of antisemitism, is often rendered as “anti-Semitism” and Microsoft’s autocorrect feature uses this version.
- Within the Jewish community, however, “antisemitism” has become the preferred more broadly accepted spelling. The IHRA says: “The hyphenated spelling allows for the possibility of something called ‘Semitism’, which not only legitimises a form of pseudo-scientific racial classification that was thoroughly discredited by association with Nazi ideology, but also divides the term, stripping it from its meaning of opposition and hatred toward Jews.”
- The term “Semitic” referred to a family of languages originating in the Middle East whose descendant languages today are spoken by millions of people. The term antisemitism has, however, since its inception, referred to prejudice against Jews alone and so should be distinguished in this way.