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Antisemitism in the United Kingdom and its relevance to Israel

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The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the UK or its Ministry of Defence.

**Introduction.** In recent years, antisemitic attacks across Europe have created a widespread sense of fear and insecurity among Jewish communities. They have also underscored the urgent need for greater efforts to address antisemitism[[1]](#footnote-1). Sadly, evidence suggests that antisemitism is still prevalent within the UK. Worryingly, it also permeates the highest echelons of society, including the political arena. The paper will therefore seek to identify why this is the case, as well as analysing some of the perpetrators and consequences, including whether an exodus of British Jews is a likely proposition. It will conclude with the consideration of Israel’s Foreign policy, its priorities and the potential impacts, particularly when dealing with countries who have both a Diaspora and issues with antisemitism.

**British Jewish Population.** The 2011 UK census suggested that there were nearly 267,000 Jewish people living in the UK, with around two-thirds (178,000) living in London. Other significant Jewish populations in England can be found in Greater Manchester, Leeds, Gateshead, Brighton, Liverpool, Birmingham and Southend. There are smaller representations in Scotland (predominantly Glasgow) and Wales, with less than 200 recorded as living in Northern Ireland. The total number of Jewish people represents approximately 0.5% of the UK population. Based on the census figures, the UK has the fifth largest Jewish population in the world, and the second largest population in Europe (after France).

**The roots of UK antisemitism.** Antisemitism in the UK originated with the arrival of Jews in the country soon after the [Norman Conquest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_conquest_of_England) in 1070. During this time Jews experienced religious intolerance and it is thought that the [blood libel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_libel) led to [massacres](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/York_Massacre) and increasing discrimination. The Jewish presence continued until [King Edward I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_I_of_England)'s [Edict of Expulsion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Expulsion) in 1290. Jews were readmitted to the UK by [Oliver Cromwell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oliver_Cromwell) in 1655, though it is believed that those with a secret allegiance to Judaism lived in England during the expulsion. Jews were regularly subjected to discrimination and humiliation which waxed and waned over the centuries, before gradually declining. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the number of Jews in Britain greatly increased due to the exodus from [Russia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia). In the aftermath of the [Holocaust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocaust), undisguised racial hatred of [Jews](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews) became unacceptable in [British society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_society). However, outbursts of antisemitism emanating from [far right groups](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Far_right_in_the_United_Kingdom) continued.

**Antisemitism Today.** The nature of incidents occur for a variety of reasons and contexts, while there are also a wide range of offenders and motives. The recording of incidents can also be problematic. In some cases victims do not want to report attacks to the Police but will inform Jewish charities and organisations. As a result it can be challenging to accurately interpret statistics. It can also be difficult to determine whether there is a spike in attacks or there is a heightened awareness of antisemitism and a change in reporting habits. Nevertheless, across a range of monitoring organisations, there is consensus that increases in activity are often related to specific events between Israel and Middle Eastern neighbours. These are often referred to as trigger events.

Evidence also suggests that there are no discernible patterns to antisemitic incidents. The threat spectrum spans communities, individuals, organisations and infrastructure. It can also take several forms including physical attacks, verbal, written abuse or material promulgated online or as leaflets and posters. Neither is there a clear correlation between the ethnicity of offenders and the type of incident. Currently, the most common type of incident remains verbal abuse directed at random Jewish people in public ie being shouted at in the street[[2]](#footnote-2).

**Antisemitism within the General Population.** The 2017 Jewish Policy Research report[[3]](#footnote-3) found that antisemitism exists in society at different levels of intensity and in different forms – known as the ‘elastic view”. It noted though that counting antisemites and measuring antisemitism are distinct. While it is assumed that the number of antisemites within the UK population is small (less than 2.4%), the number who hold antisemitic views but are not hostile is prevalent. Data indicates that 30% of people hold at least one antisemitic view, albeit a large proportion polled also agreed with one or more positive statements about Jews. Reassuringly, approximately 70% of the UK population has a favourable view/opinion of Jews and do not harbour antisemitic views at all. This is also similar to the level of sentiment expressed toward Hindus.

The stronger anti-Israel views an individual has, the more likely they are to express antisemitic views. Yet the report acknowledges that anti-Israel and antisemitism exist both separately and together. Of those who are not opposed to Israel only a minority hold antisemitic views. Yet the majority who are opponents of Israel generally hold at least one antisemitic view.

The left of the political spectrum exhibit higher levels of anti-Israeli sentiment than average but display the same amount of antisemitism as the general population. Conversely most antisemitism comes from right wing individuals and groups.

**Common Antisemitic Themes.** Needless to say, antisemitism has a number of basic tenets[[4]](#footnote-4). It has a core demonology, which looks to portray Jewish people as something different. It could either be as a powerful, malign, scheming and controlling ethnicity that holds nothing sacred in pursuit of its own interests. It can also be viewed by ideological offenders as an obstacle to their utopian ideas. Secondly, antisemitism tends to transform over periods of time. It started with medieval priests, then Enlightenment philosophers, before the Nazi SS – each told a different story in order to persecute the Jews. Arguably the latest form is the demonisation of Israel, as a result of the creation of it. Previously it was the ‘Jew’, now it is the ‘Zionist’ who takes the ire for allegedly controlling the world for Jewish purposes. It also offers an explanation of the world to the antisemite. At the same time it is delusional. The consequences though can be extremely serious and move quickly from discourse to violence during periods of civil and social unrest if left unchecked.

**How Anti-Zionist Antisemitism affects British Jews.** Not all anti-Zionists are antisemites and anti-Zionism is not necessarily antisemitic. However, some common tropes are not just critical of Israel and Zionism but are eviscerating and hostile[[5]](#footnote-5), claiming Israel is more apartheid than apartheid South Africa or that Zionism is simply racial exclusion. Nevertheless, any prejudice against Zionists as a political group can translate into hostility to Jews who do not distance themselves from Israel. Jews seeking equality in such settings can be pressured to make clear their opinion on Zionism or Israel, regardless of whether they wish to do so or not. Failure to show sufficient division from Zionism and Israel risks adversely impacting the individual.

As Alan Johnson points out[[6]](#footnote-6) within UK society there are political agendas, discourse and movements. This results in antisemitism masquerading or being ‘dressed up[[7]](#footnote-7)’ as anti-Zionism in a number of ways. By far the most common are the political groups, organisations and movements that seek to abolish the Jewish homeland. Consistent with the themes mentioned above, the ‘Zionist’ is our misfortune has replaced the old antisemitic trope, the ‘Jew’ is our misfortune. Similarly, ‘free of the Jewish State’ has replaced ‘free of the Jew’. Other perpetrators, and not exclusive to the far right, use discourse to demonise Israel as Nazi in its approach. Common canards include accusing Israel and Zionist of using violent force and starting wars as well as depicting it as a pariah state in order to bring it down. Interestingly, the defences used by antisemitic Anti-Zionists are outlined in David Hirsch’s book on Contemporary Left Antisemitism. He explains that the *Livingstone Formulation[[8]](#footnote-8)* is used widely by those accused of such crimes. In short, they claim that that they are being unfairly targeted in order to delegitimize their criticisms of Israeli human rights abuses. They also claim it is a specifically Jewish form of playing the race card. Alan Johnson further explains[[9]](#footnote-9) that it is used by offenders to deliberately refuse to engage with claims of antisemitism, before making counter accusations.

**Political Antisemitism and the Labour Party.** Adopting antisemitism policies is an inter-party issue that also concerns the ruling Government. The associated challenges are not exclusive to the Labour Party, but they do have a significantly greater problem of contemporary antisemitism within their ranks. One could argue that the reason why the Labour Party is so afflicted by antisemitism is due to its values. Ever since the late 19th Century it has espoused a post-colonialism view, championed Human Rights and liberalism while supporting the weak. Given there are a broad spectrum of views within the Party, these can sometimes manifest themselves in an intensive, fervent and radical manner. It is these views that often lead to criticism of Israel and generate antisemitism.

Of note was that during the early 20th Century, the Labour Party did support Jewish self-determination. Echoing their principle of support for the oppressed. However, the turning point came during the 1967 six day war, when the leadership supported Edward Heath’s Conservative Government in implementing an arms embargo for the warring factions. The Labour Party viewed the actions of Israel as a colonial, imperial aggressor and in the eyes of the left, Israel had transformed itself into a strong, dominant player.

However, the current problem within the Party is more serious and significant. It is also creating schisms, and some notable MPs have now resigned over its inability to address antisemitism. The much respected Frank Field MP, an advocate for social reform resigned in September 2018. He was quoted as saying that the Party risked becoming a “force for antisemitism” and had allowed a “culture of nastiness, bullying and intimidation” to develop. More recently, Luciana Berger, a British Jewish MP resigned in February 2019 stating that the Labour Party was “institutionally antisemitic” and cited Jeremy Corbyn as failing to address hatred against Jewish people within the Party’s ranks. Another six Labour MP’s followed, citing their party's Brexit stance along with the leadership's handling of anti-Semitism including Ms Joan Ryan MP, Chair of the Labour Friends of Israel Group.

Part of the issue within the Labour Party today, is that it is dominated by the far left, who succumb (either consciously or not) to a degree of antisemitism borne from their criticism of Israel and its policies. Sometimes, it results from non-racial, legitimate disapproval, but there are those who clearly use it as an alibi. It is either done to accuse Israel of Human Rights violations, being an imperial state with hegemonic tendencies or rejecting the rights of Palestinians. There are also those within the Party that are just naturally prejudice and commit acts of racial antisemitism.

In his most recent research into the Labour Party[[10]](#footnote-10), Alan Johnson reinforces Luciana Berger’s view that the Party is institutionally antisemitic. With a magnum opus of examples, he states that it has failed to understand, and is host to various forms of contemporary antisemitism[[11]](#footnote-11). Neither has it developed the appropriate and professional processes to deal with the problem. As a result, it has now become much more difficult to resolve than had been assumed.

Against these dynamics the Labour Party has also experienced an excruciating process of trying to define antisemitism rather than adopt the IHRA definition. The reason being is that the hierarchy, and specifically Jeremy Corbyn wanted greater leverage to criticise Israel and its right to existence. Nevertheless, after almost 2 years the Party did eventually adopt the IHRA definition in full.

**Jeremy Corbyn.** It has been well documented[[12]](#footnote-12) that Jeremy Corbyn previously called Hezbollah “friends” and said Hamas, also his “friends,” were devoted “to long-term peace and social justice.” (He later said he regretted using that language.) Of equal concern was when he invited the Islamist leader Raed Salah, who has accused Jews of killing Christian children to drink their blood, to Parliament, and opposed his extradition. The Labour Party leader is also a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and an early supporter of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. His office now maintains that he does not support BDS. The consensus in Labour Party circles (as stated above) is that the antisemitism crisis is a cynical political attack on Jeremy Corbyn because he supports the Palestinian cause. The Labour leadership knows it has a problem, but they consider it a political, not a moral issue. The other concern is not that Jeremy Corbyn is necessarily antisemitic himself, but that he has a record of condoning others when it comes to the antisemitic criticism of Israel. He also has an absolute personal conviction that he is an anti-racist and loathes the extremist nationalist identity politics that gave us Nazism. Therefore, in his eyes it is impossible for him to be antisemitic.

The fact that he also promotes or certainly does not prevent discourse with these types of organisations, who denounce the right of Israel to exist is concerning. In this sense he is legitimizing an approach that normalizes dialogue with terrorist groups. Although he set a precedent with his links to the Irish Republican Army leadership (another terrorist organisation), therefore his actions are hardly unexpected.

However, he could help to fundamentally change the attitude within the Party, not only by directly addressing the issues, but also with a change of approach. If he is a fully convicted anti-racist and pacifist, he should focus on bringing together all those in Israel and the Palestinian Authorities who promote peace and mutual recognition. There are a multitude of organisations including the Alliance for Middle East Peace, Darkenu, Zimam Palestine, Taghyeer Movement, Roots / Shorashim, the Blue-White Future Group, Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF), MEET, The Peres Centre for Peace, the Abraham Fund, the Geneva Initiative and many others. In short, reaching out to those who share common core Labour and left wing values would be a step in the right direction.

**UK Government Stance on Antisemitism.** Importantly, the Government’s response to antisemitism should offer reassurance. Notably, Prime Minister Theresa May's speech at the United Jewish Israel Appeal dinner in September 2018 reinforced the fact that the UK is taking the threat of antisemitism extremely seriously. The salient message was focused on supporting Jewish communities and rooting out the scourge of it. She also committed to continue the funding of £13 million each year to support the work of Jewish charities and the erection of a National Holocaust Memorial next to the Houses of Parliament.

**Consequences of a UK Labour Party Government.** In the current climate,the prospect of a Labour Government is likely to cause alarm for Israel.Given the crisis within the Party, it has also broken its relationship with the British Jewish community. A recent poll for the Jewish Chronicle published in September 2018 found that 40% of British Jews would “seriously consider” emigrating if Jeremy Corbyn were to become Prime Minister[[13]](#footnote-13). Although it in no way denigrates the level of vulnerability that the Jewish community must feel, these statistics might be down to rhetorical sentiment rather than definite intentions. Perhaps though Anthony Julius captures the realistic outcomes of a Labour Party government. In a recent Jewish Chronicle article[[14]](#footnote-14) he states that there wouldn’t be violence in the streets, nor would any Jewish people lose their jobs, or be discriminated against by legislation. However, there would be a sense of gloom and demoralisation. It would also make people have to justify one’s attachment to Israel. It could also see them retire from public and political life – almost a form of exiling. Separately it is likely the funding for the security of Jewish communities would be called into question. Nevertheless, as Julius states, it is important to keep a perspective, without over-sensationalising the issue and to acknowledge that the British Jewish diaspora is absolutely equal to the challenges of antisemitism. There is also hope that the weight of criticism on the Labour hierarchy starts to confine and contain the threat. The fact that the issue is out in the open and widely discussed at national level means it is difficult to avoid.

**Is Emigration a Possibility?** In 2017, Daniel Staetsky and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research investigated[[15]](#footnote-15) whether Jewish people were leaving Europe. The report analysed six countries – France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the UK, which account for about 70% of European Jews. It concluded there had been an increase in migration[[16]](#footnote-16), especially from France, Belgium and Italy; but in the UK, [Germany](https://www.theguardian.com/world/germany) and Sweden levels of migration were not unusual. Suggesting a definition of an exodus as 30% of the Jewish population, it said 4% of Jews in [Belgium](https://www.theguardian.com/world/belgium) and France had left for Israel between 2010 and 2015. The proportion leaving from the UK, Germany and Sweden was between 0.6% and 1.7%. Certainly and fortunately, no parallels with 1930’s Europe can be drawn.

However, the report suggested a number of reasons for the levels of emigration, noting that there are both push and pull factors. Most people feel a positive connection with their country of origin. The sheer familiarity of life and the comfort that comes from this are important pull factors in relation to people’s country of origin. Some countries, particularly Western ones, have strong economies and provide good economic opportunities, and these constitute additional pull factors. The most obvious push factors are safety issues, including antisemitism, and economic downturns. In this sense, Israel can present itself as an attractive opportunity.

Notably in 2016, the Israeli Prime Minister, [Benjamin Netanyahu, urged European Jews to migrate en masse to Israel](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/leaders-criticise-netanyahu-calls-jewish-mass-migration-israel)[[17]](#footnote-17) following terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen. This is not the first time this has occurred. Following the collapse of the Oslo peace process and rise of antisemitism in France due to Israeli policies, Ariel Sharon made the call for *aliya*. It once again raised the issue of ‘dual loyalty’ (addressed later). However, it was also met with a firm response from European politicians and Jewish community leaders who called on Jews to stay in Europe, saying terror was not a reason to emigrate.

**Antisemitism and Israeli Foreign Policy.** Conversely some of Israel’s foreign policy approaches could be construed as mixed messaging and being insensitive to the wider Diaspora. This can be the case where it prioritises national interests (eg political and financial aspects) ahead of Jewish ones. It may be uncomfortable for the assimilated Jews, who may not necessarily agree with the policies but have an affinity with both Israel and their host nation. It thus creates a tension in their ‘dual loyalty’ and can manifest itself in a number of ways[[18]](#footnote-18). Either through seeking to promote Israel through lobbying, or having to justify the actions of the State, even if they are critical of its policies, or speaking out because it breaches their core values. One such example was the Intifada in 1987, which had an adverse and polarising effect on the Diaspora – not too disimilar to the sentiments of the Israeli general public. It was partly due to the nature of the militray force employed, but also the policies on settlements and Palestinian national rights. It also led to some very public criticism by well-known Diaspora Jews such as Woody Allen and violinist Yehudi Menuin.

Furthermore, Israel’s acceptance of specifically European and South American right-wing figures could be mistaken as a paradox when viewed through the lens of antisemitism[[19]](#footnote-19). Recent dialogue with France's Marine Le Pen, the Italian Deputy Premier Matteo Salvini, Hungary's Viktor Orban, Poland's Mateusz Morawiecki, and the newly elected Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro provide the most precise view of the nature of Israel's political alliances in the current period. Particularly concerning was Orban’s election campaign[[20]](#footnote-20) which demonised the Jewish American-Hungarian investor and philanthropist George Soros. He also sought to rehabilitate the reputation of Hungarian wartime leader Miklos Horthy, who deported hundreds of thousands of Jews to their deaths, while embracing nationalistic policies. Separately, the Polish government has come under renewed criticism for seeking to divorce itself from any state responsibility for the Holocaust. As Noa Landau suggests[[21]](#footnote-21), part of the reason for these affiliations could be to use the Visegrad Group[[22]](#footnote-22) as part of a plan to erode the EU consensus on issues concerning the Palestinians and Iran. It could also be because there are fewer of the Diapora in Eastern Europe and therefore (the direct) sensitivities might not be so acute.

Nevertheless, it is these connections that can undermine any claims of countering antisemitism when perhaps emboldening and providing legitimacy to groups, movements and individuals that pursue [far-right](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Far-right) or non-democratic agendas. Within Europe it also risks ignoring the deep concerns of Jewish leaders and the historical lesson that any government which targets minorities and undermines liberal democracy is ultimately a threat to the Jewish people. Similarly, some of the spikes in antisemitism abroad are linked to trigger events resulting from Israel’s domestic policy approach. There is no question of the right to self defence, but how far the consequences of these actions and the effects on the wider Diaspora should be considered is challenging. Some would rightly argue that Israel should represent Israeli interests first and foremost.

**Conclusion**

There are a range of factors that can cause antisemitism, including trigger events and periods of heightened awareness that also result in spikes of activity. Specifically, evidence suggests that increased Israeli and Palestinian tensions, as well as media coverage of antisemitism in the UK can have a consequent effect. There has also been a rise in the number of attacks attributable to Brexit (and the associated nationalistic fervor); as a result of the European migration challenges; significantly, the issues within the UK Labour Party, and the ease with which social media can propagate hatred. Given these factors, it is unlikely that there will be a reduction in the overall level of antisemitism in the short term.

That is not to say that more cannot be done. Tackling hate crimes through education and on social media will require greater effort, particularly given the prevalence of the latter. Nevertheless, given the good relations with Israel, there is a mutual understanding that it can be dealt with successfully.

Even if the situation in the UK were to deteriorate or the Labour Party were to gain power, it is unlikely to generate an exodus of British Jews. There might be a very modest increase in *Aliyah* and general emigration. However, it is more likely that Jewish people would withdraw from public life and high profile appointments, under the constant threat of hatred. A key consideration in assisting the UK’s Jewish population is also Israel’s Foreign Policy and the recognition of trigger events. Similarly, remaining sensitive to the ‘dual loyalty’ challenge and diplomatic engagements in pursuit of national priorities, will help maintain the powerful voice of the Diaspora.

1. The term antisemitism, can also be spelt with a hyphen. However, many academics and international organisations indicate that the latter allows for the possibility of something called ‘Semitism.’ This infers a form of pseudo- scientific racial classification which is incorrect. Therefore, the unified ‘antisemitism’ spelling will be used throughout this paper, so that the meaning is absolutely clear.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BBC, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43542305>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. JPR and CST, 2017, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Johnson, 2019, <http://fathomjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Institutionally-Antisemitic-Report-FINAL-5.pdf> p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hirsch, 2018, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ## Johnson, 2015, <http://fathomjournal.org/the-left-and-the-jews-time-for-a-rethink/>.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Johnson, 2019, <http://fathomjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Institutionally-Antisemitic-Report-FINAL-5.pdf> p.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Named after the former Labour MP, Ken Livingstone, who was suspended from the Labour Party for antisemitic views in 2016 and later resigned. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Johnson, 2019, <http://fathomjournal.org/fathom-report-institutionally-antisemitic-contemporary-left-antisemitism-and-the-crisis-in-the-british-labour-party/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Johnson, 2019, <http://fathomjournal.org/fathom-report-institutionally-antisemitic-contemporary-left-antisemitism-and-the-crisis-in-the-british-labour-party/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The socialism of fools, classical racial antisemitism and antisemitic Anti-Zionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. # Gold, 2018, [https://harpers.org/archive/2018/10/among-britains-anti-semites](https://harpers.org/archive/2018/10/among-britains-anti-semites/).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [Harpin](https://www.thejc.com/landing/Author/Lee%20Harpin), The Jewish Chronicle, 2018, https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/nearly-40-per-cent-of-british-jews-would-seriously-consider-emigrating-if-corbyn-became-pm-1.469270. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Julius, 2019, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/uk-jews-face-perfect-storm-of-left-wing-and-right-wing-antisemitism-anthony-julius-warns-1.478624>. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Staetsky, 2017, [https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2017. Are\_Jews\_leaving \_Europe.pdf](https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2017.%20Are_Jews_leaving%20_Europe.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Guardian, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/12/rise-in-numbers-of-jews-leaving-europe-for-israel-is-not-an-exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Beaumont, The Guardian, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/leaders-criticise-netanyahu-calls-jewish-mass-migration-israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rynhold, 2005, Israel’s foreign and defence policy and Diaspora Jewish identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bazian, 2019, Daily Sabah. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Wootliff, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/yesh-atid-as-pm-lapid-would-demand-orban-apology-for-anti-semitic-campaign/> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Landau, 2019, Haaretz, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-to-host-summit-of-visegrad-group-of-central-european-governments-in-february-1.6878150>. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Which includes Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)