

IS IT ANTI-SEMITISM?

A Few Helpful Guidelines with Examples

Three useful criteria for determining if something is anti-Semitic

Sometimes anti-Semitism is obvious and indisputable. In cases where it is not so clear, here are three criteria for determining whether or not something is anti-Semitic:

1. Are Jews or Israel being singled out for blame?
2. Is a liberation movement (Black Lives Matter, the women's movement, Gay liberation, the labor movement) being diverted from its mission by attacks on Jews or Israel?
3. Does the situation, or the policy being proposed, increase the isolation of Jews from other oppressed groups?

Contemporary examples of anti-Semitism

At the United Nations NGO Conference on Racism: The United Nations Non-Governmental Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, was a significant event that brought together thousands of anti-racism activists from all over the world. At the same time, the primary agenda of the conference was often derailed by the targeting and singling out of Israel for blame for all of the problems in the Middle East.

Some conference participants expressed hatred of Jews by wearing buttons that read "Hitler didn't do enough of his job." A cartoon was circulated at the conference depicting a Jewish man with a hooked nose, a beard, and blood pouring from his hands, which were clasped in a greedy pose. The cartoon resembled oppressive "blood-libel" caricatures of Jews that had circulated for centuries in Europe. The former president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, the head of the non-governmental portion of the conference, when shown a copy of the cartoon responded, "If these anti-Semitic cartoons are being passed out here in Durban, then I'm a Jew." At the closing ceremonies, a sizable number of the audience—people who devote their lives to fighting racism—booed her because she had taken a stand earlier in the week against anti-Semitism.

The United States walked out of the conference in Durban, claiming it was because of the anti-Israel rhetoric. In fact, the Bush administration was always unenthusiastic about participating in the conference because it didn't want to risk possible legal ramifications of endorsing a policy that would include reparations for the descendants of Africans brought to the United States as slaves. The United States could conveniently stay silent about some of its real reasons for leaving the conference and instead claim they were only leaving because of the condemnations of Israel. This left the real motivations behind the United States' leaving Durban hidden, and instead Palestinians and Jews were left fighting one another. This is a classic way that anti-Semitism works—setting Jews up to be blamed for larger systemic issues.

At the Creating Change Conference: At the Creating Change Conference, a large gathering of LGBTQ activists in Chicago, Illinois, USA, in 2016, A Wider Bridge, a group that supports LGBTQ activists in Israel, was invited, then uninvited, and finally re-invited to the conference. During the conference, members of A Wider Bridge, as well as other visible Jews, were physically attacked, and the police had to intervene. The rationale given for the attack was that anyone who supports Gay activists from Israel should not be allowed into the conference because of Israel's oppressive policies toward Palestinians.

Israeli LGBTQ activists were the only ones being condemned. Activists from other countries with well-known human rights violations were welcomed. This attack on U.S. Jews and Israeli Jews ripped apart the conference. Once again, the mission of an important liberation effort was undermined by singling out Israeli activists and Jews for condemnation.

In the Labor Party in England: The Labor Party in England was seriously weakened by attacks on Jeremy Corbyn from the right, in which anti-Semitism was used as a pretext for attempts to weaken and dismantle the party. Corbyn, a promising leader with a progressive program, had held several meetings with pro-Palestinian leaders. Although he also met with Jewish leaders and voiced strong support for Israel's right to exist while challenging the continued Occupation, the right attacked him and labeled him anti-Semitic. In the guise of "protecting Jews," the right was actually using Jews to weaken the Labor Party. This example demonstrates that people's rushing to defend Jews, or defend Israel, can still function as anti-Semitism.

In the U.S. election in 2016: Periodic references to "Jewish power and influence," by government officials and others, perpetuate the scapegoating and blaming of Jews. During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, for instance, the Trump campaign used a flyer with a picture of Hillary Clinton surrounded by Jewish stars, dollar signs, images of Wall Street, and the names of well-known Jews in the finance industry. The campaign withdrew the picture in response to criticism, but not before the subliminal message had been delivered: that Clinton, and the Jews who supported her, were to blame for the economic struggles of working-class people. In the year following the 2016 elections, there was a 67% rise in anti-Semitic incidents in the United States.

On U.S. college campuses: On many U.S. college campuses, there is growing conflict between Jewish students and other progressive students. In recent years, some Jewish students have been barred from participation in progressive coalitions, particularly if they hold positions in support of Israel. It is assumed that they could never be impartial, regardless of their personal position on the Occupation or Palestinian rights.

Student groups that support Palestinian liberation are building coalitions with Black Lives Matter, environmental groups, LGBTQ groups, and women's groups. Some of these coalitions do not allow Jewish students to participate, particularly if they support Israel. This is an example of anti-Semitism. Sometimes these groups even block open dialogue and the airing of different opinions. While it is essential to be organizing with other groups on behalf of Palestinian liberation, in the long run, excluding Jews who care about Israel from these coalitions will not help win Palestinian liberation.