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Introduction

WHAT WE ARGUE ABOUT WHEN WE ARGUE ABOUT ANTISEMITISM

ANTISEMITISM IS RESURGENT. Although not as pervasive as it once was, its rise in many places is undeniable. In recent years, record numbers of antisemitic incidents and hate crimes have been reported in many countries, antisemitic discourse has steadily moved from the fringes of Western societies to mainstream culture and politics, and antisemitic violence has become more frequent and more lethal worldwide.¹ In the United States, for example, eleven Jewish worshipers were murdered during a Shabbat service in a synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018 and three people were killed at a kosher grocery store in Jersey City in December 2019; in the United Kingdom, two people were killed at a synagogue in Manchester on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur in October 2025; and in Australia, fifteen people were gunned down during a Hanukkah celebration at Sydney's Bondi Beach in December 2025. There have been many less fatal and foiled antisemitic attacks, such as one in March 2026, when a man armed with a semiautomatic rifle crashed a pickup truck loaded with explosives through the front entrance of a synagogue in suburban Detroit, where more than one hundred Jewish children were attending preschool (and, as it happens, where my wife's uncle was working—such connections are not uncommon given the small size of Jewish communities).²

Hardly a day now passes without antisemitism making headlines. Not long ago, antisemitism was widely regarded as a shameful relic of the past that had been banished from mainstream politics and polite society. In the second half of the twentieth century, its association with Nazism and the Holocaust discredited antisemitism, driving it underground. Although it persisted in private, antisemitism became publicly taboo and politically toxic. However, since the dawn of the twenty-first century, the comforting belief that antisemitism had been delegitimized, marginalized, and was gradually diminishing has been shattered by its revival, initially in Europe and more recently in North America over the past decade. Far from obsolete, it now appears to be a growing social problem and security threat to Jews around the world, who have faced online harassment, street assaults, and attacks in their homes, schools, and synagogues.

The resurgence of antisemitism began well before the Palestinian Islamist militant group Hamas led a surprise attack against Israel—the deadliest attack Israel had ever experienced—on October 7, 2023, during which nearly 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals, mostly civilians, were killed, and 251 people were taken hostage to the small strip of land populated by over two million Palestinians known as Gaza, which was then under Hamas control.³ However, antisemitism surged worldwide and online after Israel began its massive military retaliation for the October 7 attack. During the first few months of Israel’s war in Gaza, the number of recorded antisemitic incidents soared in many countries. In France, for instance, where a Jewish woman was stabbed in her home and a swastika was graffitied on her door,⁴ the number of reported antisemitic incidents in the three months following the October 7 attack equaled those of the previous three years combined.⁵ In Britain, where two Jewish schools were vandalized and a sign outside a Holocaust library and research center was defaced with graffiti,⁶ more antisemitic incidents were reported in those three months than in any previous year.⁷ In the United States, where a man broke into a Jewish family’s home threatening to kill them while shouting “Kill Jews” and “Free Palestine,”⁸ the number of reported antisemitic hate crimes committed between October and December 2023 almost equaled the number of

reported incidents in all other months of 2023 combined.⁹ Elsewhere, a synagogue in Germany was firebombed,¹⁰ a Jewish cemetery in Austria was desecrated,¹¹ Jewish stores in Spain were vandalized,¹² and gunshots were fired at two Jewish schools in Canada.¹³ An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on October 31, 2023, went as far as to call it, “The Global War on the Jews,” and alarmingly stated that, “The disturbing fact of the past month is that Jews are under attack not only in Israel and not only by Hamas. [. . .] Only anti-Jewish hate can explain how synagogues, children and airports are targets of this outrage.”¹⁴ Even in Israel’s liberal *Haaretz* newspaper, one commentator lamented, “It is clear that Jews today have a reason to be afraid wherever they live.”¹⁵

Jews around the world have undoubtedly grown more concerned about antisemitism, particularly in the wake of the October 7 attack.¹⁶ Even American Jews, who had long considered themselves relatively free from the scourge of antisemitism that afflicted Jews elsewhere, are increasingly worried about it.¹⁷ Many now express that they no longer feel secure in a country once viewed as uniquely welcoming and a safe haven from antisemitism.¹⁸ Nearly half of American Jews surveyed in September 2025 said that there is “a lot” of antisemitism in the United States.¹⁹ It is not only Jews who have become more concerned about antisemitism; Americans and Europeans, in general, have as well. Surveys show that many, if not most, Europeans now perceive antisemitism as a problem in their countries,²⁰ and Americans are now much more likely to think that antisemitism is a problem in the United States than they were two decades ago.²¹

Arguments About Antisemitism

The resurgence of antisemitism and growing public concern about it have made antisemitism a salient and prominent issue in a way that it has not been since the Holocaust and the end of World War II. In many Western countries, combating antisemitism now occupies a much higher place on the national political agenda than it once did. But while concern about antisemitism is growing, so too is disagreement about antisemitism. For the first time, it has become a highly controversial and

fiercely debated topic. In a time of rising antisemitism, one would have hoped that people would unequivocally condemn it and come together to counter it. Unfortunately, much more time and energy is spent incessantly arguing about antisemitism than countering it. Our disagreements not only hinder our response to antisemitism but also make it more difficult for us to simply discuss the issue in a civil manner.²² Indeed, it sometimes seems that it is no longer possible to discuss it without the conversation becoming acrimonious. As British journalist Rachel Shabi observes, “the subject of antisemitism has become such a horrible, divisive battleground, an ugly, distorted mess of claims and counter-claims [...]”.²³

Why has antisemitism become such a fiercely contentious issue? If nearly everyone—apart from avowed antisemites themselves—agrees that antisemitism is wrong and recognizes it as a genuine and growing problem, what are these arguments actually about? Most often, they center on whether something or someone is antisemitic, because such determinations are often not straightforward. Most people do not freely admit to being antisemitic and do not express antisemitic views in a blatant, obvious way. Antisemitism is often subtle and coded (when, for instance, “the Jews” are not explicitly mentioned). In these cases, the question inevitably arises: *is this antisemitism?* Addressing such a question requires interpretation and judgment, which leads to disagreements.

Our disagreements, however, are not limited to questions of whether this or that accusation of antisemitism is warranted. They also extend to what actually constitutes antisemitism. What, exactly, makes something antisemitic? What kinds of beliefs, language, images, or actions qualify as antisemitic? There is no consensus, even among Jews. One observer writes that, “Nowadays virtually everyone is opposed to anti-Semitism although no one agrees about what it means to be anti-Semitic.”²⁴ The question of which speech or actions qualify as antisemitic lies at the core of many debates about antisemitism, and since people disagree on what counts as antisemitic, tackling antisemitism inevitably becomes more challenging.

Domestic political partisanship also fuels disagreements about antisemitism. In numerous countries, the issue of antisemitism has become

politicized, leading to partisan debates and politically motivated accusations. Politicians frequently accuse members of rival political parties of either engaging in or at least tolerating antisemitism. And it is not just politicians who view the problem of antisemitism through a partisan lens. Although antisemitism is present across the political spectrum, this does not stop people from insisting that it is only a serious problem among those whom they consider their political opponents. In the United States, where Democratic and Republican voters now disagree on nearly everything, they also disagree about antisemitism. Political partisanship influences perceptions of antisemitic threats, concerns about antisemitism, and the attribution of responsibility for the problem.²⁵ Democrats tend to focus on antisemitism on the right and are more inclined to perceive the far right as an antisemitic threat, whereas Republicans concentrate on antisemitism on the left, are more likely to view the far left as an antisemitic threat, and are more likely than Democrats to label criticism of Israel and boycotts of Israeli products as antisemitic.²⁶ On both sides, there is a tendency to ignore, downplay, or trivialize antisemitism within their own political camp.

The Intersecting Issues of Antisemitism and Israel-Palestine

Many, if not most, contemporary arguments about antisemitism arise because of questions related to Israel, which are often inextricably linked to what Edward Said famously termed the “question of Palestine.”²⁷ These questions dominate much of today’s public discourse about antisemitism and drive most of our current debates. It has become almost impossible to discuss antisemitism without reference to Israel-Palestine (the term “Israel-Palestine,” as I use it in this book, covers the entire territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which was once British-ruled Palestine and is now Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip). As the issue of antisemitism has become increasingly intertwined with the polarizing issue of Israel-Palestine, antisemitism has become just as polarizing and divisive. The intertwining of antisemitism and Israel-Palestine also makes accusations of

antisemitism particularly contentious. When vocal critics of Israel or pro-Palestinian activists are accused of antisemitism—as they often are by pro-Israel advocacy groups and activists—these accusations are typically dismissed by Israel’s critics as false and dishonest, intended solely to silence or smear them. This dismissal is, in turn, denounced as antisemitic in the pro-Israel camp. The cycle of accusations and counter-accusations can go on and on.²⁸

The Israel-Palestine issue makes it much harder for people to agree on what is or is not antisemitic because different opinions about antisemitism are often derivative of different views on Israel-Palestine. While most agree that criticism of an Israeli government policy is not necessarily antisemitic, there is no consensus on where to draw the line between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism. For example, is it antisemitic to call Israel a racist or “apartheid state”? Is opposing Zionism antisemitic? If an individual or a group, like a human rights organization, criticizes Israel’s human rights violations more than those of other countries with similar or worse records, is that antisemitic? Nor is there any agreement on which actions or protests against Israel are legitimate and which, if any, are antisemitic. For example, is boycotting Israel antisemitic? Is it antisemitic to exclusively boycott or divest from Israel? The Israeli government and many pro-Israel organizations assert that the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel is antisemitic, while BDS supporters or sympathizers view it as a legitimate, nonviolent form of popular protest, dismissing the antisemitism charge as an attempt to discredit and suppress activism supporting Palestinian rights.

Public debates about antisemitism often center on these contentious questions. While these debates have persisted for many years, they have become more urgent and intense in recent years as opposition to Israel’s treatment of Palestinians has grown. For instance, public officials, university administrators, human resources officers, and social media platform regulators, among many others, have been compelled to tackle the question of when criticism of Israel or pro-Palestinian speech crosses into antisemitism. And, as anti-Zionism has been having a revival, the long-running debate over whether it constitutes

antisemitism has recently emerged as one of the most fiercely contested issues of our time.

Thus, the politics and passions surrounding the Israel-Palestine issue have spilled over into the issue of antisemitism, rendering it a far more contentious and divisive issue than it once was. This was particularly evident during the recent two-year-long war in Gaza from October 2023 to October 2025, in which Israel killed at least 67,000 Palestinians in Gaza, many of them women and children, made more than two million homeless, starved civilians, and turned most of the besieged territory into rubble.²⁹ Israel's indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment of Gaza (widely considered to be one of the most intense bombardments in history), its mass killing of Palestinian civilians, systematic destruction of Gaza's civilian infrastructure, and denial of desperately needed humanitarian aid to Gaza sparked global outrage, leading to widespread accusations of genocide and large protests against Israel in major cities and on university and college campuses around the world.³⁰ The relentless, daily stream of horrifying and heartbreaking images and videos coming out of Gaza—of mangled, bloodied bodies, grieving parents, emaciated children, destitute families, and destroyed neighborhoods—made any discussion about pro-Palestinian activism, anti-Zionism, and antisemitism highly charged. Outrage at Israel's appalling actions in Gaza seemed to make it difficult if not impossible for some to acknowledge rising antisemitism or to condemn antisemitic incidents. For others, fear and alarm about antisemitism, coupled with anguish over the massacres on October 7 and hostages held in Gaza, muted whatever criticisms they might have had of Israel's conduct in Gaza. The issue of antisemitism became further entangled with the Israel-Palestine issue, and much more divisive.

The Aim of This Book

In this book, I explain how and why the issues of antisemitism and Israel-Palestine have become inextricably entangled, highlighting some of the resulting consequences, with a primary, though not exclusive, focus on the United States (where the vast majority of Jews outside

Israel live). I also address the most challenging and contentious questions about antisemitism in the context of Israel-Palestine, particularly those concerning what is or is not antisemitic. To do this, I draw on empirical studies and an analytical framework derived from scholarship on racism. This framework aids in understanding what constitutes antisemitism and in distinguishing between different types of antisemitism. Using this framework, I aim to offer guidance in differentiating between what is and is not antisemitic regarding the issue of Israel-Palestine.

In what follows, I propose that we ask ourselves the following five questions to help us determine whether something is antisemitic or not:

1. Is the speech or behavior motivated by hostile feelings toward and/or negative beliefs about Jewish people?
2. Does the action discriminate against, deliberately target, or single out people or groups because they are identified as Jewish?
3. Does the policy, procedure, or practice disadvantage or harm Jewish people more than other people?
4. Are Jews as a group systematically oppressed, exploited, or excluded?
5. Does the speech or image invoke, wittingly or unwittingly, slurs, negative stereotypes, tropes, myths, or conspiracy theories about Jews?

It is not always easy or even possible to answer these questions—determining whether public speech or action is motivated by anti-Jewish sentiments or beliefs is particularly difficult—and they may be answered differently by different people in different contexts. Nevertheless, these five questions can at least ensure that people are on the same page when it comes to deciding what is antisemitic, and they can be useful in thinking through how something might be antisemitic.

In the first chapter, I attempt to clarify the book's central and widely misunderstood concept. Our misunderstandings are at the root of much of the current difficulty we have with recognizing antisemitism or agreeing on what is antisemitic. In chapter 1, I discuss the changing

meanings of the term over time, summarize the scholarly debate over its appropriate usage, and assess the often-expressed claim that it is a unique and incomparable phenomenon. I argue that while antisemitism has distinctive features (particularly its longevity), it should be considered a specifically anti-Jewish form of racism, akin to but not identical with anti-Black racism and Islamophobia.

Chapter 2 discusses the ongoing attempt to establish a common definition of antisemitism in the form of the “working definition of antisemitism” adopted in 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and endorsed since then by numerous governments and a host of nongovernmental entities. I explain how this definition originated, why it has been widely endorsed, and why it has attracted so much criticism and opposition. I also compare the IHRA definition of antisemitism with two other definitions, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and the Nexus Document, which have recently been promoted as alternatives to the controversial IHRA definition. (The IHRA definition is reproduced in its entirety in this chapter; the other two definitions are located in two appendixes, at the end of this book.) Chapter 3 turns to the notion of the “new antisemitism,” which holds that Israel is a victim of antisemitism because it is a Jewish state and hence perceived and treated as the “collective Jew among the nations.” The chapter traces the history of this controversial idea from the late 1960s, when it was first expressed after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, to the early 2000s, by which time it had become conventional wisdom among Israeli Jews as well as in many Jewish communities around the world. I assess the validity of the notion of a new antisemitism targeting Israel by examining the role antisemitism plays in attitudes toward Israel and criticism of it. I argue that antisemitism sometimes drives hostility toward Israel and can also surface in extreme criticisms of Israel. But I point out the flaws in the new antisemitism concept, notably in the conflation many of its proponents make between the State of Israel and the Jewish people. Chapter 4 addresses the question of whether anti-Zionism is antisemitic—a question that has become ever more fraught as anti-Zionism has become more popular and prominent in discussions about the future of Israel-Palestine. This chapter seeks to shift us

away from binary thinking and polarized positions toward contextual judgment. Rather than ask whether anti-Zionism is antisemitic, I propose a different question: *when* is anti-Zionism antisemitic? I address this question by examining historical and contemporary examples of antisemitic and non-antisemitic anti-Zionism.

In subsequent chapters, I explore the harmful consequences of conflating anti-Zionism, criticism of Israel, and pro-Palestinian advocacy on the one hand with antisemitism on the other. Chapter 5 discusses the misuse and abuse of antisemitism accusations against critics of Israel, human rights groups, and pro-Palestinian activists. I explain how and why Israeli officials and pro-Israel advocacy groups routinely make accusations of antisemitism and unpack the political purposes these accusations serve. I focus in particular on how they have tried to frame the BDS movement—the only sustained, large-scale, popular effort around the world to pressure Israel to respect Palestinian rights, often likened to the anti-apartheid movement against South Africa—as antisemitic. The deliberate and concerted attempt by the Israeli government and pro-Israel groups to brand BDS as antisemitic facilitates efforts to penalize or even criminalize BDS activism. I present another case study of the weaponization of antisemitism charges in chapter 6, showing how, under the guise of “combating campus antisemitism,” President Donald Trump’s administration, in his second term of office, has used antisemitism charges to justify the detention and attempted deportation of pro-Palestinian foreign students and an unprecedented set of punitive actions against numerous universities. The chapter also discusses antisemitism on American college campuses, and the growing phenomenon of Jewish students being singled out, shunned, and marginalized if they support Israel or are Zionists (or sometimes merely presumed to be so). This became manifest especially after the outbreak of the war in Gaza in 2023, when the largest ever wave of pro-Palestinian protests on US university campuses took place, culminating in “Gaza Solidarity” encampments on many campuses in the spring of 2024. Chapter 7 discusses these controversial campus protests and describes in detail how a moral panic about them developed, fueled primarily by the media and politicians. Israel-Palestine had long been a toxic and divisive issue on

American college campuses, arousing strong emotions and provoking arguments between students and faculty alike,³¹ but the pro-Palestinian campus protests in fall 2023 and spring 2024 sparked a media frenzy and a national political uproar, and captured American public attention. University and college administrators were placed under intense pressure to stop the protests on their campuses, ostensibly in order to ensure the safety of their Jewish students. Consequently, protest encampments on many university campuses were forcibly cleared by heavily armed police, student and faculty protesters were arrested (at times violently), and more restrictive rules were imposed on campus protests.

Finally, the conclusion presents a critique of how the fight against antisemitism is currently being waged in the United States and in other Western countries. While I do not claim to have all the solutions for combating antisemitism, I hope to persuade my readers that efforts to fight antisemitism are doomed to fail if they are misconceived, misdirected, or misused, especially when they are employed to suppress advocacy for Palestinian rights or to stifle debate about Israel-Palestine. Although there is no single right way or magic solution to combat antisemitism, I argue that aligning the fight against antisemitism with the broader struggle against racism can help.

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