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Antisemitism: New Approaches to Fighting an Old Battle

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Antisemitism is on the rise in America from all sides of the political spectrum and within different segments of society. For decades, our nation's top law enforcement agencies have warned that hate from a continuum of bad actors is thriving and that their activities are often motivated by antisemitic tropes. It has most painfully manifested in violent outbreaks, like in Pittsburgh, Poway, Jersey City, and Monsey, but it also permeates the public consciousness in subtler ways. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) 2019 Hate Crimes report confirmed what we have seen: Most religion-based hate crimes in the United States are antisemitic (FBI, 2020). The 2019 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found that the total number of antisemitic incidents in 2019 in the US had increased by 12% over the previous year (ADL, 2020). This threat has become more pervasive during the pandemic, fueled by conspiracy theories, and embraced by an array of extremists. This is the reason the Jewish community has invested heavily in promoting antisemitism education, tracking extremists, enhancing security, and working with law enforcement to defend against potential threats.

Antisemitism in the United States has also manifested itself in new ways. The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas saw a 75% spike in antisemitic incidents in the United States (ADL, 2021). Jews wearing kippot were attacked on the streets in New York City, synagogues were targeted, and social media was abuzz with antisemitic comments. The latest round of fighting showed, perhaps in the most obvious way, the strong connection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Antisemitism in recent years has been marked by this connection, although not all accepted the validity of that link; after the events of May 2021, both Jews and non-Jews can no longer effectively argue that they unconnected.

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Nonetheless, we are also aware that antisemitism can manifest in subtle ways—that is, in patterns that are difficult to detect, track, and prevent. In fact, incidents that are seemingly innocent on the surface could mask antisemitism or reflect deep ignorance, which is a worrying trend that must be addressed.

Challenges

A. Identify Antisemitism

In 2018, Arielle Mokhtarzadeh, the president of the Jewish Undergraduate Students Association Council at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), returned from winter break to find her mezuzah missing from her office. It was not the first time that such an incident has occurred, and after some wrangling, she managed to convince the police to add a security camera above her door. This incident was just one in a series of events that had been documented for over 10 years (Lerner & Susskind, 2019). By the end of 2018, the Department of Education had opened an investigation based on allegations of "harassment on the basis of shared ancestry" (Stop Antisemitism, 2020).

A similar pattern was noted at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) where, as at UCLA, Jewish students and local Jewish community groups eventually filed a formal civil rights complaint because of a documented pattern of antisemitism. In this case, in addition to mezuzahs being removed and buildings being vandalized with swastikas, administrators had removed a Jewish student from a student government position because of her perceived bias on issues that are related to Israel (Padilla, 2020). Eventually, the university acknowledged that a line had been crossed and acts of intolerance and antisemitism had occurred in their campus, but not until after a Department of Education Office of Civil Rights case had been filed (Office of the Chancellor, 2020). In the case of UCLA and UIUC, the tracking of incidents over time was critical in identifying antisemitism. Unfortunately, up to two-thirds of all hate crimes in the US are never reported, and without accurate data, the undertaking of appropriate responsive action is hindered (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2020).

Additionally, it is not always clear to law enforcement officials and other parties how to qualify an incident of antisemitism. To many, vandalizing a property with a swastika is clearly an antisemitic act, but what if the culprit was Jewish or not of sound mind? What happens when the victim of antisemitism is not Jewish? Without a clear definition of antisemitism, we cannot expect this concern to be addressed clearly.

B. Intersectionality and Antisemitism

Intersectionality, a general concept and field of study exploring how different types of oppression interact, explains how activism can be co-opted and abused by antisemites. Generally, intersectionality examines how social categorizations—such as gender, class, and race—overlap in the lives of various people. This includes women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and others who have been marginalized by dominant social constructs like patriarchy and white supremacy. The term intersectionality, which can be

useful in understanding and challenging social injustices, has gained newfound exposure in the past four years, seeing more regular use in the context of political organizing. We expect this to continue as more attention is being given to the oppressions of marginalized communities. Anti-Israel activists, especially those associated with divesting and boycotting Israel, have used this tactic as a part of their campaign to delegitimize and undermine support for Israel.

Another harmful abuse of the intersectionality concept is the effort to exclude Jews from progressive activist circles. In these cases, Jews are defined as part of the dominant American power structure and automatically linked to the militarily powerful Israel. This is especially troubling because Jews have fully demonstrated that they are natural partners in the struggle for social justice. They claim that it is not enough to be merely critical of Israel's current government and policies; Jews are expected to reject Israel altogether. This demand was evident, for example, in the fall of 2020, when the Tufts Students for Justice in Palestine introduced a referendum to the Tufts student government calling for the university to apologize for participating in a program that sends US law enforcement personnel to Israel for training and information swapping. This litmus test, called "Deadly Exchange," is inherently discriminatory and attempts to apply issues with police violence in the US to the Israel–Palestine conflict. Its application to the conflict on college campuses is a malicious technique intended to alienate Jewish students from progressive movements they may otherwise support. Tufts University student government passed the referendum, and Jewish students like Max Price were harassed and targeted when they opposed the referendum (Weiss, 2021). Additionally, Jewish and pro-Israel students at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign filed a civil rights complaint with the Department of Education following targeted harassment. Jewish students at the university have been pressured to condemn Israel in order to participate in organizations such as student government. If Jewish students express outward support for Israel, they are branded as "colonizers," "racists" or supporters of "apartheid." Accusations against American Jews having a "dual loyalty," for example, cross this line. Casting Jewish Americans as the *other* suggests that commitment to one's faith or to the State of Israel conflicts with devotion to America. For centuries, this denunciation has been aimed at Jews in countries all over the world—from the Spanish Inquisition to the Russian pogroms and the Holocaust—all of which comprise historical company that no American should want to keep.

In 2019, *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens tried to explain the difference. "Of course it's theoretically possible to distinguish anti-Zionism from antisemitism," he said, "just as it's theoretically possible to distinguish segregationism from racism. But the striking feature of anti-Zionist rhetoric is how broadly it overlaps with traditionally antisemitic tropes" (Stephens, 2019).

Response

A. Identifying Antisemitism

We believe it is important for the US to fully adopt the "working definition" of antisemitism of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Since it was crafted in 2016, more than 200 organizations, universities, states, and municipalities around the world have adopted it, along with the US State Department and Department of Education, the European Union, and 28 countries. We would like to see the IHRA definition, which was passed through Executive Order in 2019, being consistently applied by the federal government so that the patterns of harassment and hostile environments to which Jews are subjected are assessed according to a consistent standard that will help identify and support instances of potential discrimination.

Establishing a clear definition and improved reporting can help address the issue of rising antisemitism with greater success, but we are unlikely to be able to fully rid the country of this scourge.

To help distinguish legitimate criticisms of Israel from antisemitism, it is helpful to understand the different strands of classical antisemitism: religious (Jews as Christ killers), economic (Jews as manipulators of global finances), racist (Jews as ethnically inferior), and ideological (Jews as culturally subversive). Below are some examples of the types of arguments, tropes, and motifs used in conversations about Israel that cross the line from legitimate critique to antisemitism:

- depicting Jews or Israelis as dominating the finance industry or the media, or controlling governments outside of Israel
- denying the legitimacy of the State of Israel and the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in any portion of its ancient homeland, while supporting the rights of others, including Palestinians, to national existence
- applying a double standard by criticizing Israeli policies that are ignored or excused when implemented by nations other than Israel
- using Holocaust and other antisemitic imagery to criticize Israel (i.e., calling Israelis the "new Nazis")
- demonizing Israel, its Jewish citizens, or the Jewish people globally for complex issues like the Israeli–Palestinian conflict
- portraying Israeli Jews as white European colonizers, denying the indigeneity of Jews in the land, and erasing the stories of more than half of Israel's Jewish citizens who are people of color
- assigning to Israel the responsibility for all Palestinian violence and incitements or justifying all Palestinian violence and incitements
- denying the rights of Jews or Israelis to defend themselves against violence and existential threats
- casting aspersions on Jewish religious beliefs or practices as primitive, tribal, or parochial
- assigning biblical responsibilities and judgments to the State of Israel that are not assigned to other countries or believing that the Jewish people lost their rights to the land because of their rejection of Christianity.

"Classical antisemitism denies the rights of Jews as citizens within society," said the great Israeli diplomat and scholar Abba Eban. "Anti-Zionism denies the equal rights of the Jewish people to their lawful sovereignty within the community of nations . . . All that has happened is that the discriminatory principle has been transferred from the realm of individual rights to the domain of collective identity" (Eban, 1975).

B. Coordination

Nationally, the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), the central body of the organized Jewish community, works with a number of groups. The most significant is the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which was founded to call out antisemitism and hatred in all forms.

Additionally, the ADL tracks extremist activities and runs educational programs on antisemitism for a variety of audiences. They coordinate closely with JFNA and the Secure Community Network (SCN), founded by the Jewish federations, which serves as the Jewish communal security arm and liaises with federal law enforcement. SCN works with the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and through the Community Security Directors, with local law enforcement. The JFNA recently announced the LIVESecure initiative that will assist communities and Jewish institutions to apply and access funds for physical security. We know that these relationships with local law enforcement are essential to supporting the safety and security of the Jewish community.

In 2010, the Jewish Federations of North America created the Israel Action Network, an organization whose sole purpose was to find ways to identify and address anti-Israel and antisemitic incidents and work with local federations and partner organizations to take appropriate action against them and share best practices across the US. Typically, local efforts to combat antisemitism are coordinated most often by the Jewish federations, with support from the Israel Action Network and regional ADL offices.

A recent effort by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations on Combating Antisemitism, chaired by the JFNA and the ADL, brought dozens of groups together to coordinate responses and tackle issues around legislation, working with diverse audiences, and the physical security of the Jewish community. It is important to note that while the landscape is crowded with groups that work on combating the delegitimization of Israel, the number of groups that work to fight antisemitism is smaller and better coordinated.

The uptick in antisemitism has been met with concern from both Jewish and non-Jewish communities, and we have seen a rise in the number of groups working to address it. Often, the proliferation of groups can bolster a local effort to address antisemitism. However, sometimes, it can stymie the work and create coordination challenges.

C. Intersectionality and Antisemitism

Today, as threats to all Americans are on the rise, we need to implement a new approach to working with other groups to fight hate of all kinds and to educate about antisemitism and its dangers. In response, there needs to be a broad educational campaign around the definition of antisemitism and how to identify it. In his pinnacle piece "How Antisemitism Animates White Supremacy," Eric Ward, the executive director of the Western States Center, makes the strong case that you cannot fight white supremacy without fighting antisemitism. This argument needs to be more widespread through educational campaigns and community relations work. We are working with individual Jewish federations to ensure local consensus on these issues so that local Jewish communities can speak with one voice on these issues to non-Jewish partners, interfaith partners, law enforcement, and elected leaders.

The JFNA and its Jewish community partners are also doing more to combat antisemitism and anti-Zionism through education. We have seen that antisemitic tropes are often spread through ignorance of their origins, particularly in the pop culture sphere and through social media. More must be done to explain the history of antisemitism and its relationship with anti-Zionism and educate those who know so little. Similarly, the organized Jewish community is working on building relationships with groups that are fighting bigotry overall but might not have a Jewish voice at the table.

D. Government

The last three presidential administrations have appointed Special Envoys to Combat Antisemitism and have viewed antisemitism as discriminatory. Most recently, the US Department of State adopted the IHRA working definition on antisemitism, and a December 2019 Executive Order formally adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism to be used when determining discrimination under the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This Executive Order was based upon the Antisemitism Awareness Act, which JFNA supported and that had strong bipartisan support in Congress. We have already seen how this definition can be helpful in assisting universities with identifying antisemitism and antisemitic forms of anti-Zionism. This must be done through a consistent and coordinated effort including a push to encourage the IHRA definition's use as guidance for educators, judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement officials in recognizing antisemitic activity or determining whether an alleged act was motivated by discriminatory antisemitic intent.

Over this same period, state governments have made efforts to enhance hate crime laws and educate about antisemitism. Three states have already adopted the IHRA definition: Florida, South Carolina, and Kentucky.

Conclusion

Like other vulnerable groups, the Jewish community has faced growing physical and psychological threats in recent years. Antisemitism can be seen in all facets of society, from Congress to college campuses, and across all social media platforms. Particularly recently, antisemitism and anti-Zionism are intimately linked, making it difficult—

especially for younger Jews—to reconcile their support for Israel with progressive causes. To address these challenges, the organized Jewish community, led by the Jewish Federations of North America, have worked not only to address the physical security of all Jewish people but also to tackle antisemitic and anti-Zionist sentiment via education, legal protections, and coalition-building.

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