

# **Increased Antisemitism in the United States Following Operation Guardian of the Walls: Permanent or Short-Lived?**

**Shahar Eilam and Tom Eshed** | November 10, 2021

## **Introduction**

Both antisemitic concepts and views and public expressions of antisemitism are usually rooted in a social and cultural heritage, and in ideas originating in religious beliefs, sociopolitical ideology, and race-based theories. All these were developed and formed gradually, usually according to trends and underlying social movements. Despite the slow incremental evolution of antisemitic perceptions, our study emphasizes their turbulent and explosive dynamic, which converts an obscure platform of abstract concepts and ideas into concrete public expressions of antisemitism. The study also demonstrates that, like other social phenomena, antisemitism comes in waves, triggered by social, economic, and political developments, events, and crises, some of which are completely unrelated to Jews in general and to the Jewish community in particular. An upsurge of antisemitism has recently swept across the US and other parts of the world, closely following a series of crises, such as the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, mounting interracial tension, growing political polarization in the election year, and escalation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

In other words, antisemitism does not occur in a vacuum; it is an extreme symptom of other broader social phenomena that challenge society as a whole

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and the Jews in particular in various ways and aspects. In combating the phenomenon of antisemitism, dealing solely with its severe and violent symptoms is insufficient; it is therefore imperative to comprehend the root problems and the social base from which it grows.

This essay concerns the wave of antisemitism that took place in the US following the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 (Operation Guardian of the Walls). This is not, of course, the first time that escalation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict resulted in a wave of protest against Israel and in an increase in the number of reported antisemitic incidents. The fundamental assumption in the analysis of the recent developments in the US in this matter is that the embers had already been smoldering before Operation Guardian of the Walls began, but the operation ignited them and enabled them to move from the realm of ideas into the public space. For this reason, in this wave of antisemitism, it is possible to analyze the problematic elements and the underlying trends that promote and spread antisemitism, particularly when Israel is involved.

This article employs antisemitic events that occurred following Operation Guardian of the Walls as useful, individual test cases for understanding broad phenomena and trend—both familiar and new ones—of antisemitism in the US. An analysis of the events in question yields a complex picture of reciprocal affinities and influence. Antisemitism in the US is influenced by processes and events in American society, the Jewish community, and Israel. Above all, it obviously affects the lives of American Jews as individuals and as part of a community as a whole, as well as the entire Jewish people. It also affects the Jewish community's system of affiliations and connections with Israel and the special relationship between Israel and the US.

### **Antisemitism in the United States: A Symptom of Sociopolitical Changes**

Antisemitism in the US has been trending upward in recent years. This trend is reflected by an increasing number of documented antisemitic incidents, especially violent ones. Equally important, however, it is accompanied by a growing anxiety about antisemitism within the Jewish community and a more extensive public and political discourse around it.

The growth of antisemitism relates to long-term underlying trends in American society, led by the increasing tensions between the different groups within the US. These tensions are expressed, inter alia, by surging and deepening sociopolitical polarization, extremism, and the strengthening of extremist marginal groups and their gradual penetration into the political center. The rise of antisemitism is also linked to recent crises in the US: the multidimensional

Covid-19 pandemic; racial tensions, which escalated following the killing of George Floyd; and the long, harsh, and divisive 2020 election campaign. These divisive and polarizing trends and expressions of hatred are exacerbated by the unrestrained and vitriolic discourse taking place on social media. In addition, there is the trend toward politicizing the issue of antisemitism and turning Israel into a matter of dispute in the public and political discourse among various groups in the US, including within the Jewish community.

At the center of the trend toward politicization of antisemitism is an ostensibly legitimate argument about the definition of antisemitism, which is supposed to help combat the phenomenon. In actuality, however, the discourse about antisemitism has become a powerful tool for promoting a range of political agendas in several spheres:

In the struggle between power groups in American politics over **the image of America**, both between right and left, and between establishments and elites and their opponents;

In the struggle over **the image of the Jewish community in the US**—over its unique values and those that it shares with other groups in American society, its political activity, its internal power centers, and its affiliation with Israel;

Recently, in the context of **Israel's standing in the US** and the relations between the two countries.

The primary significance of this trend is that it has become more difficult to form a broad and united front to condemn and combat antisemitism of any type. The difficulty is due to the fact that the various groups, both Jewish and non-Jewish, do not agree on the practical meaning of antisemitism. They recognize mostly the threat posed by statements made by the opposite side of the political spectrum but downplay the importance of antisemitism in the political camp to which they belong. In this state of affairs, the parties seem more interested in scoring points against each other than in waging a common battle against antisemitism.

The politization of antisemitism is, of course, an expression of the ongoing political polarization trend in the US. During the four years of the Trump administration, antisemitism was at the center of the Jewish community's agenda, mainly due to the accumulation of exceptional and deadly antisemitic events, led by the violent antisemitic rally in Charlottesville in 2017 and the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. These events highlighted the threat posed by the extreme right, specifically by white

supremacist organizations. Just as the right-wing extremist organizations felt that they had won legitimacy to voice their doctrine and act accordingly in public during the Trump administration's term (and some have alleged that the president's actions encouraged this conduct), under the Biden administration, extreme left-wing organizations feel that they have a public legitimacy and much more freedom to promote their agendas, even when they are not supported by the White House. At the same time, however, it would be too early to say that the US is facing a wave of left-wing antisemitism.

### **Operation Guardian of the Walls, Antisemitic Events, and Their Discourse**

Operation Guardian of the Walls, conducted by the IDF in the Gaza Strip during May 10–21, 2021, led to incidents that went beyond the conflict between Israel and Hamas, including violent riots between Arabs and Jews in Israel. The operation found expression in the public, political, and Jewish American discourse in the US. Dozens of pro-Palestinian demonstrations took place throughout the country during the operation (Ebrahimji, 2021), together with a considerable number of demonstrations in support of Israel organized by the American Jewish community (Times of Israel, 2021). Like previous violent clashes between Israel and Hamas, the IDF's operation also affected the American political theater. President Biden expressed support for Israel's right to defend itself and called for a ceasefire between the parties. The Republican Party gave its unanimous support for Israel's actions, compared with a more limited expression of support for Israel by the Democratic Party. Quite a few Democratic lawmakers, including some who supported Israel's policy in previous military campaigns, protested injuries allegedly inflicted by Israel on innocent civilians and expressed support to reduce large-scale US defense aid to Israel during the operation or to impose conditions for further aid (Kampeas, 2021c).

In addition to the political events, the operation both during and after fueled the public's unrest. The US witnessed a wave of antisemitic events, including violent attacks on Jews in several locations, some during protest demonstrations against Israel. Jewish organizations also reported a steep rise in non-violent antisemitic incidents, compared to before the operation, and an increased anxiety about growing antisemitism among American Jews. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 131 incidents were reported in the week preceding the operation, while 193 incidents were reported during the operation, 11 of which constituted violent attacks against Jews. The ADL also reported an increase in antisemitic statements on social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok (ADL, 2021a).

Several grave violent incidents occurred during this period, including:

- On May 18, pro-Palestinian demonstrators attacked Jewish diners at a restaurant in Los Angeles (Moon & Chan, 2021).
- On May 20, a Jewish man was attacked in New York City, close to the scene of a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Times Square (Chavez & Gingras, 2021).
- In Florida, Jews were severely harassed in a number of incidents (Levin, 2021).
- On May 22, Jewish teenagers were attacked on a street in Brooklyn and later near a synagogue. Following the attack, the local police stepped up security around Jewish institutions in the city (Setty, 2021).

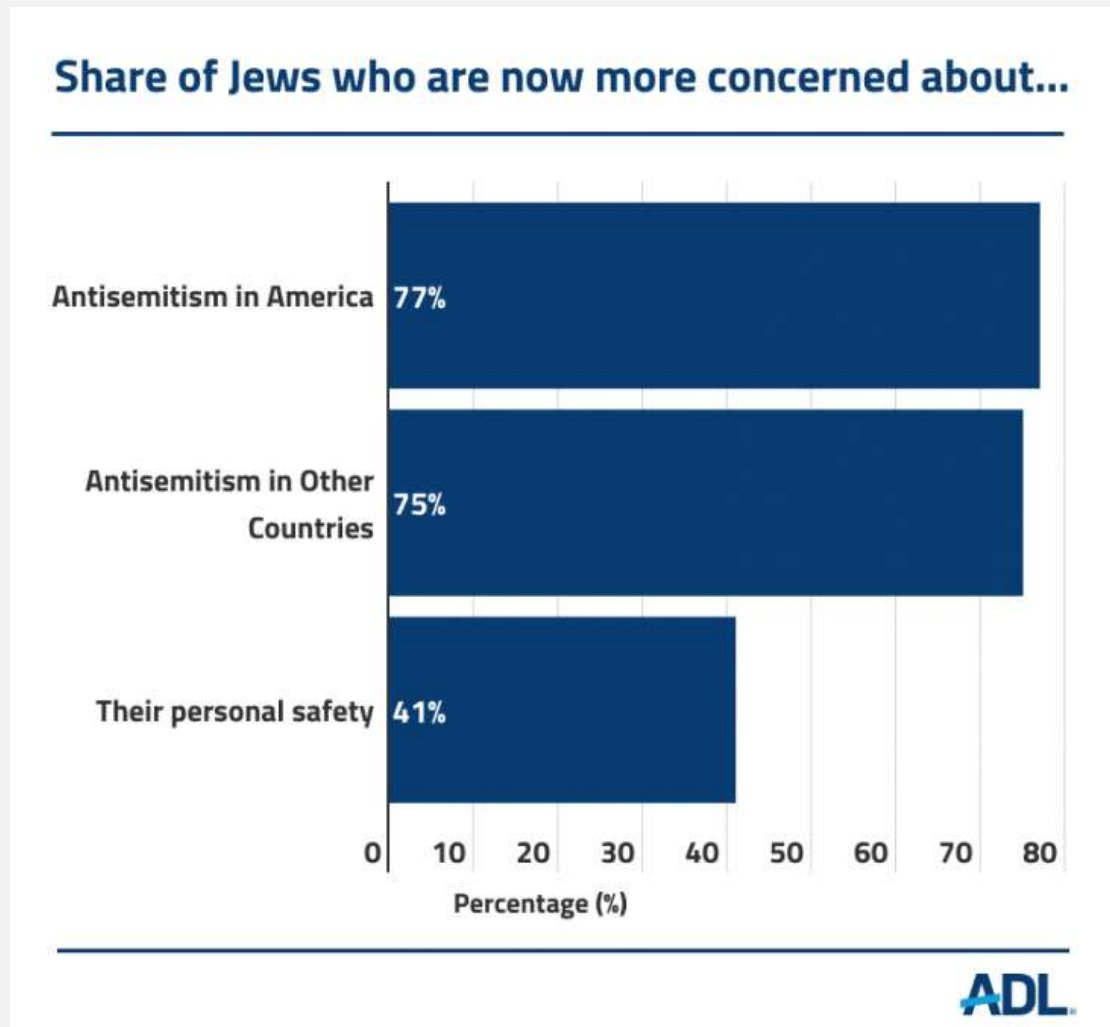
The cultural sphere also did not remain tranquil during the Israeli operation. American Rabbi Shmuley Boteach published an announcement in the *New York Times* accusing singer Dua Lipa and models Bella and Gigi Hadid of antisemitism after they severely criticized Israel on social media. In response, Lipa insisted that the announcement had distorted what she had said, and she declared that she was committed to the struggle against racism of any kind (Kennedy, 2021).

From a comparative perspective, the increase in antisemitic incidents and the media and social discourse as a result of Operation Guardian of the Walls was similar to what had occurred in the context of previous escalations between Israel and Gaza, such as Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014. Earlier operations, however, were not associated with violent antisemitic incidents, as most incidents consisted of vandalism against Jewish institutions and antisemitic slogans voiced during demonstrations against the operation (ADL, 2014). Many pro-Palestinian demonstrations also took place in the US following Operation Guardian of the Walls, some of which had thousands of participants (Ebrahimji, 2021). Although experts claimed that most of the rhetoric in the demonstrations against Operation Guardian of the Walls was less extreme than in previous demonstrations against Israeli policy, it was the first time that violent incidents against Jews occurred in close proximity to the demonstrations (Beauchamp, 2021). While the number of violent events was limited, their geographic distribution was broad.

Immediately after the operation ended and because of the grim events, the ADL conducted an opinion poll from a representative sample of the Jewish population in the US (see Figure 1). According to the poll, 77% were more worried about antisemitism in America after the operation, 41% were more concerned about their personal safety, and 60% reported that they had witnessed antisemitic

conduct or remarks in the public sphere and on the internet. An absolute majority of those questioned said that they wanted the administration, both political parties, civil social organizations, and non-Jewish religious leaders to do more to combat antisemitism in the US (ADL, 2021c).

**Figure 1.**



*Note.* From the public opinion poll conducted by the ADL among American Jews following the increase in antisemitic events in May 2021 (ADL, 2021b)

In view of these events, five leading Jewish organizations—the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the ADL, Hadassah, the Jewish Federation of North America (JFNA), and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of North America (OU)—signed a joint letter to President Biden on May 21 asking him to put his full weight behind the struggle against antisemitism, to appoint a special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism as well as a liaison in the White House to the Jewish community, who will lead a discussion there about the concrete steps

needed to address the phenomenon, to speed up the handling of antisemitism on campuses, and to invest more in security for Jewish institutions (ADL, 2021b).

The violence against Jews has garnered much attention and was denounced extensively by the American political establishment. President Biden severely condemned the events (Sullivan, 2021), and senior White House officials spoke about the events with representatives from many Jewish organizations and discussed how to respond to them (Kampeas, 2021a). Leaders of both parties in the House of Representatives and the Senate censured antisemitism in a mass “virtual march” (Sales, 2021). The US Senate passed a bipartisan resolution condemning the antisemitic events in the US and worldwide (i24 News, 2021), and in the wake of the events, a group of Jewish and Black senators decided to establish a joint group to combat antisemitism (Shalev, 2021). Even the “squad,” members of the House of Representatives identified with the progressive wing of the Democratic Party who have severely criticized Israel, published announcements condemning the increase in antisemitic incidents (Kampeas, 2021b).

Although the number of antisemitic events seem to have dropped somewhat since the end of Operation Guardian of the Walls, at the same time, the American Jewish community is still greatly concerned about the matter. For example, a broad coalition of Jewish and pro-Israel organizations, among them the ADL and the AJC, organized a rally in Washington on July 11 under the title, “No Fear: A Rally in Solidarity with the Jewish People,” in order to condemn the recent antisemitic attacks on Jews in the country. 2,000 people attended the rally. Several leftist American Jewish organizations, among them J-Street and Americans for Peace Now, did not participate in the rally because of their opposition to the working definition of antisemitism used by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and the connection they assert it makes between antisemitism and legitimate criticism of Israel (Kampeas, 2021d).

### **What Can Be Learned From the Wave of Antisemitism Following Operation Guardian of the Walls?**

Ostensibly, this is not a new development. As noted, a similar increase in antisemitic expressions and incidents took place following previous rounds of escalation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Most of the parties responded as expected to the escalation and took advantage of the events in the Middle East to express their support or protest according to their outlook and agenda.

In actuality, however, this time the Jewish community was doubly surprised by the rapid transformation of protests by the American extreme left, especially the



pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli groups, into outbreaks of violent antisemitic acts that had broad geographic distribution and by the increased criticism of Israel among larger circles within the Democratic Party than in the past as well as among several civil social organizations. The Jewish community—which relies, *inter alia*, on close relations with non-Jewish communities and organizations—faced a cohesive, organized, and effective pro-Palestinian camp, which succeeded in recruiting support from growing audiences, especially minority communities, in the US.

A series of violent events, exceptional and unprecedented in their scope, geographic distribution, and origins took place during and immediately after the operation and in response to active discourse about the issue on the social networks, the media, and in American politics. The main perpetrators were pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli groups. Several of the attackers, most of whom were Arab-Americans, were arrested by the law enforcement authorities. The events highlighted the process of convergence between anti-Israeli expressions and antisemitic ones. The occasional assertion that these are two completely separate and distinctive phenomena can be challenged by the centrality of Israel for the Jewish people and its status as the nation-state of the Jewish people in the perception and consciousness of both Jews and non-Jews. There is no reason to assume that this convergence trend will abate any time soon.

The events also underlined the dangerous slippery slope that begins with legitimate criticism of Israel's policy and its actions in the context of the conflict with the Palestinians, which frequently slides into hostility and hatred toward Israel, delegitimization of its existence as the nation-state of the Jewish people, and various expressions of antisemitism. Furthermore, the violent events in question are often an extreme result of a dynamic composed of an activity on the ground (such as leading a mass protest), discourse on social networks (which often fans extremism and hatred and harnesses activist energy for various campaigns), media coverage (which reiterates the messages and shapes narratives), and frequently also events in the political theater (which are liable to provide legitimacy for ideas and initiatives in civil society).

The polarizing atmosphere, the social and political divisions in the US, as well as internal struggles for control of the center of power and the anchors of the existing order are also pertinent to Israel. Breaches have appeared in the traditional widespread bipartisan support for Israel among the public and in the political arena. Criticism is increasing, together with expressions of hostility toward Israel and its Jewish and non-Jewish supporters.



The most important development is the close link in recent years between pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli groups and marginalized groups in American society. This link is called intersectionality. According to the principle of intersectionality, the struggle of one group integrates with the struggle of another. For example, the struggle of ethnic minorities integrates with the feminist struggle, or with the struggle of the LGBTQ community. At the center of this trend is the progressive movement, which has grown in strength in recent years and is attracting growing public and political support among liberal audiences. The American progressive movement is challenging the existing order by demanding social equality and justice that will reduce the power and influence of the economic and social elites in favor of making more rights, opportunities, and resources available to the marginalized groups. Its outlook distinguishes groups based on belonging and identity, between those who are privileged and those who have been marginalized on the basis of origin, gender, or sexual orientation. It calls for an expansive government policy aimed at redressing the distortions in the existing order and acts to unite the forces of the marginalized to lead the necessary change.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the attitude toward Israel are not an important element of the progressive ideology in the US; nonetheless, anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian groups in the US have expanded in recent years by riding the developing platform of the progressive wave, mainly by comparing between the conflict and the various injustices on which the American progressive discourse focuses, such as the Black struggle in the US against discrimination and racism and the Palestinian struggle against Israel and by likening the situation in Israel to apartheid in South Africa (Israel as an oppressive “white” country). Through these comparisons, they aim to undermine the concept of the special relationship between the US and Israel and are demanding that support in general, and defense aid in particular, be contingent on changes in Israel’s policy. Escalating events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as Operation Guardian of the Walls, are obviously a golden opportunity to voice these messages in the political arena (via the progressive members of Congress), the media, and the social networks.

### **The Effects on American Jews**

As noted, violent antisemitic incidents are usually an extreme symptom of alarming social trends. Just as incidents carried out by supporters of white supremacy have been justifiably attributed to the strengthening of the extreme right in the US and elsewhere in the world, and have not been dismissed as mere aberrations, violent incidents against Jews—such as those in May 2021—should

be attributed to a growing hostility against Jews, including in the context of Israel, among extremist left-wing and pro-Palestinian groups. A cautious working assumption is that these were not singular events, and that attention should be paid to the social and political circumstances that allowed them to occur.

The issue of Israel is becoming more controversial in both the Jewish community and in American political discourse. There is no reason to assume that this situation will change in the near future, because it is unlikely that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will end any time soon. The criticism of Israel and expressions of protest against its policy, frequently combined with anti-Israeli rhetoric and the use of antisemitic images, already are no longer a marginal phenomenon. They are becoming normal and increasingly legitimate and are also gradually penetrating the mainstream media, local and national politics, and a variety of public campaigns. Among the critics of Israel's policy toward the Palestinians, the proponents of the pro-Palestinian camp, some of whom are also clearly anti-Israel, have become increasingly prominent. The political power of this group is gradually growing, as is its influence on the criticism of Israel and its contribution to undermining the traditional widespread and unconditional support for Israel among members of the Democratic Party—the political home of the majority of American Jews.

The question arises of how the public and political argument on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be conducted in the US without jeopardizing the security of the American Jewish community. This is one of the greatest challenges facing the leaders of the community and the public leaders in general.

American Jews are finding themselves in the eye of this storm, regardless of their wishes. The vigorous discourse about Israel and the conflict with the Palestinians obviously heads the Jewish community's agenda. A decisive majority of American Jews support Israel, even if they are somewhat critical of its policy and actions. A small but vocal minority of Jews is hostile to Israel and even contributes to the campaign to delegitimize it by defying the pro-Zionist attitude and the support for Israel by the Jewish majority. More and more liberal Jews, especially those belonging to the progressive camp, are being attacked for their support of Israel. They are being asked to choose between belonging to progressive groups and participating in their activities or adhering to their identification with Israel and their pro-Zionist outlook.

If the current trends continue, the liberal American Jews, and certainly those belonging to the progressive camp, will find it difficult to maintain both their support for Israel and their allegiance to their political and moral home. They will

have to either resolve the tensions between the two or choose one over the other. This impossible choice is one of the greatest challenges currently facing progressive Jews in the US.

The events in the US during and following Operation Guardian of the Walls have exposed the depth of these phenomena and trends, causing shock and embarrassment among many groups of American Jews. They were taken aback at the force of the opposition and protest against Israel and their devolving into violent antisemitic attacks. They were also surprised by the growing difficulty that Israel's supporters experienced in enlisting their natural allies and partners and sometimes felt that various parties were reluctant to condemn and take action against antisemitic expressions.

These events and the subsequent shock caused several Jewish leaders and organizations to open their eyes, triggering an internal and public discourse of soul searching and the community's need to consider how to organize given this challenging situation. It is premature to say whether the temporary upheaval experienced will lead to substantial changes among American Jews in comprehending and assimilating the challenges and to appropriately organize in order to deal with them.

### **The Effects on Israel's Relations With Both the United States and the Jewish Community**

Operation Guardian of the Walls was an important initial test of the Biden administration's relations with Israel and its leadership. The new Democratic administration found itself subject to severe pressure from both sides, between external criticism from the Republican Party, which expected a demonstration of unqualified support for Israel, and internal criticism from some members of the progressive camp in the Democratic Party, which expected the administration to establish clear barriers and conditions for supporting Israel. The president and his administration maneuvered with great success between these political constraints and pressures, expressed public support for Israel, and conducted a continuous discrete dialogue with Israel's leadership throughout the conflict.

Nevertheless, the events showed that the current administration is likely to face far more political internal pressure at home from both right and left with respect to its policy on Israel, especially in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This situation could restrict the freedom of action that Washington will allow Israel in terms of future developments in the conflict arena and could generate gaps and tensions vis-à-vis interests and other aspects of policy of the two countries.

Israel's biggest challenge in this respect has been and still is to preserve and increase bipartisan American support for it—the most important anchor in the special relationship between the two countries. Israel's relations with the Democratic Party and its voters should therefore be made the focus of attention and effort by decision makers and the relevant professional personnel in Israel in the coming years.

The Jewish community in the US can play an especially important role in the ongoing dialogue between Israel and the various American communities, as it has already done in the past. The community's discourse with its partners in the various sectors of American society is a key element in its ability to survive the challenges of the period. It can both serve Israel's interest and improve the community's standing and connections in the public and political theater in the US. This obviously requires an open and comprehensive dialogue between Israel and the Jewish community institutions and organizations. This dialogue is, of course, an important value in and of itself, because the relationship between Israel and the Jewish community in the US—the two largest Jewish concentrations in the world—is one of the main factors that will determine the future of the Jewish people in the coming generations.

Furthermore, the events in the US following Operation Guardian of the Walls attracted a fairly large degree of interest in Israel, while they also chipped away somewhat at the ignorance and indifference usually typical of Israelis toward the effects of events in the Middle East—particularly Israel's policy and actions—on American Jewry. Israelis became more aware of the underlying trends in the US and the impact of their actions on the American Jewish community's support for Israel. The change in Israel must start at home, and include, inter alia, a better knowledge of the American Jewish community, its challenges, and the issues with which it is engaged.

## **Conclusion**

This article examined one disquieting but brief episode—centered around the antisemitic events in the margins of the protests against Israel following Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021—to understand the long-term trends and the broad context of contemporary antisemitism in the US.

The wave of antisemitic events that took place in May 2021 is a single occurrence in a historic continuum and in an ongoing dynamic of antisemitism. In addition to its special characteristics, it is also a symptom of broader phenomena affecting the lives of Jews and the society in which they live.

The events of May 2021 highlight the connections between anti-Israeli perceptions and protests and antisemitism. To some extent, they also undermine the prevailing idea among many that the danger of violent antisemitism in the US comes exclusively from the extreme right, rather than from both sides of the political spectrum.

At the same time, the danger to the Jewish community in the US does not lie merely in physical antisemitic violence and its direct effects on the personal and community security of American Jews. It also consists—and perhaps mainly—of processes of normalization and mainstreaming of expressions of antisemitism in relation to delegitimization of Israel, or in the guise of a more critical attitude toward it. These are often accompanied by the delegitimization of Israel's Jewish and non-Jewish supporters, which upsets their sense of security and ability to conduct their lives according to their own worldview without facing a mounting risk and threat from their environment. The effects of this trend on the American Jewish community are liable to be severe.

At this stage, it is too early to determine whether the antisemitic events of May 2021 reflect a substantive change in the development of antisemitism in the US and in combating it. Nevertheless, we assert that these events exposed and highlighted broad trends and alarming phenomena affecting the lives of American Jews, their standing and integration in American society, and their relations and affiliation with Israel. Furthermore, these trends and phenomena affect Israel's status and the attitudes toward it among various groups in American society, therefore influencing the special relationship between Israel and the US.

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