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Are We Asking the Wrong Questions about Antisemitism?

Batsheva Neuer | No. 2144 | May 24, 2026

The question "When does anti-Zionism become antisemitism?" has become one of the most common ways of framing contemporary debates about Jews, Israel, and discrimination. Yet for policymakers, this may not be the most useful question. It assumes that the central task is to classify anti-Zionism as an idea before addressing its consequences. A more practical approach would ask how anti-Zionism operates in contemporary political life: whom it targets, what burdens it places on Jews and Israelis, and whether it denies Jews forms of collective identity and security granted to others.

Anti-Zionism has never been a single doctrine with a single source. It has emerged from different religious, ideological, and political traditions, some of which were not rooted in hostility toward Jews.

One important strand of Jewish opposition to Zionism was theological and eschatological. Certain ultra-Orthodox groups, most notably Satmar Hasidism, rejected Zionism because they believed Jewish return to Zion must await messianic redemption. From this perspective, Zionism was not merely politically mistaken but religiously improper: an attempt to force redemption before its divinely-appointed time.

Other forms of Jewish anti-Zionism were grounded in liberal, civic, or universalist arguments. Some Jews in the modern period feared that defining Jews as a nation would undermine their claim to equal citizenship in liberal states. The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform of American Reform Judaism, for example, declared that Jews were no longer a nation but a religious community and expected neither a return to Zion nor the restoration of laws concerning a Jewish state. Bundist anti-Zionism, by contrast, emphasized *doykeit*— "hereness" — and argued that Jewish political and cultural life should be built where Jews already lived, rather than in a future national homeland.

These distinctions matter for historians. Anti-Zionism, like other theoretical concepts, must be understood in its different contexts: theological, liberal, socialist, universalist, nationalist, and postcolonial. But for policymakers, historical complexity cannot become an excuse for analytic paralysis. Many discriminatory ideologies have had coherent rationales. The practical question is not only what an ideology claims to mean, but what it does in the world.

The Limits of the Standard Question

The question “When does anti-Zionism become antisemitism?” often appears neutral. It suggests a necessary distinction between legitimate criticism of Israeli policy and hatred of Jews. That distinction is important. Democratic societies must preserve space for criticism of governments, including Israel’s.

But the question can also function as a diversion. After antisemitic incidents — harassment at synagogues, threats against Jewish institutions, intimidation of Jewish students, exclusion of Israeli speakers, or attacks on visibly Jewish spaces — the response is often reframed as a debate over “criticism of Israel.” Contemporary anti-Zionist Jewish groups, such as Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), are then invoked as a moral alibi: evidence that anti-Zionism cannot be antisemitic because some Jews themselves endorse it.

This approach does not answer the central problem. The existence of Jewish anti-Zionists does not explain why synagogues, Jewish schools, kosher restaurants, Jewish students, Israeli academics, Israeli artists, or Jewish cultural institutions are targeted for events in the Middle East. Nor does it explain why Jewish belonging in the Diaspora is increasingly made conditional on political disavowal of Israel. Instead, the invocation of groups like JVP often shifts attention away from the discriminatory act and toward an abstract debate over ideology.

The demand to first locate the precise ideological source of the discrimination — whether anti-Zionism, criticism of Israel, anti-colonial politics, or some other rationale — is a test rarely imposed on other minority groups. This is not to say that intention is irrelevant. In law and policy, motive can matter. But discriminatory intent is not always visible, and institutions should not wait for a full genealogy of the actor’s ideology before recognizing discriminatory burden, unequal treatment, or harm. In other civil-rights contexts, we do not excuse sexism because it appears in paternalist rather than openly hostile form. We do not dismiss racism because it is expressed in religious, cultural, or universalist language rather than biological terms. Discrimination can be polite, theological, paternalist, ideological, or progressive in tone and still remain discriminatory in effect.

Only in the case of anti-Zionism is the existence of a non-hateful or internally coherent rationale often treated as though it suspends the question of prejudice altogether. For example, an activist may frame the exclusion of an Israeli speaker as anti-colonial protest rather than anti-Jewish animus; but the relevant institutional question remains whether a person or group is being excluded because of Israeli or Jewish collective identity.

From Intention to Function

For policy purposes, the focus should shift from intention to function. The question should not be only: “What does anti-Zionism mean?” It should also be: “How is it being used?”

When anti-Zionism leads to the targeting of Jews or Israelis as such, the exclusion of Jewish or Israeli students from public spaces, the intimidation of Jewish communities, Israeli speakers, or Israel-linked institutions, or the denial to Jews of forms of collective identity granted to other peoples, it cannot be treated as merely a political opinion. At that point, its social role becomes discriminatory, whatever its stated rationale.

This does not mean every critique of Zionism or Israel is antisemitic. Nor does it mean policymakers should regulate political thought. Rather, institutions should distinguish between political disagreement and discriminatory burden. Opposition to a government, coalition, war, or policy is part of democratic discourse. But holding Jews or Israelis collectively responsible for Israel, treating Jewish or Israeli institutions as proxies for Israeli policy, or accepting Jewish identity only when severed from attachment to Israel are not ordinary forms of political critique. They are contemporary expressions of unequal treatment.

The Limits of Self-Definition

A functional approach should also apply to political labels more generally. Just as anti-Zionist Jewish groups should not be used automatically to absolve anti-Zionist activism of antisemitism, organizations that call themselves Zionist, pro-Israel, or pro-peace should not be treated as such simply because they adopt those terms.

This does not mean that any official body should decide who is or is not Zionist. Nor does it mean that disagreement over Israeli policy disqualifies a group from being Zionist or pro-Israel. There are, of course, different views among Israelis, Jews, and Zionists about how best to protect Israel's security, preserve its democracy, and pursue peace—one need only spend a few minutes in the Knesset plenum to understand that debate is central to Israel's character.

The point is narrower: political labels should be tested against practical consequences. Terms such as "anti-Zionist," "Zionist," "pro-Israel," and "pro-peace" are not merely descriptive. They often function as claims to legitimacy. Policymakers, communal institutions, universities, and civil-rights frameworks should therefore ask not only what organizations call themselves, but what their positions and conduct mean in practice.

A group may identify with Zionism while advancing policies that others may view as weakening Israeli deterrence, narrowing Jewish collective self-determination, or placing Israel under exceptional scrutiny. That disagreement is itself part of democratic debate. But the label alone should not settle the question. The same functional standard should apply across the spectrum: what matters is not only the terminology an organization adopts, but the consequences of the positions it advances.

Policy Implications

This approach suggests several guidelines.

First, institutions should focus on conduct and consequences. The relevant question is not whether an actor can offer a sophisticated explanation for anti-Zionism, but whether Jews are being excluded, threatened, harassed, or treated as collectively responsible for the actions of the state of Israel. This is also a useful way to distinguish protected political speech from discriminatory conduct. The issue is not whether a view is offensive, but whether it produces exclusion, intimidation, unequal treatment, or collective blame.

Second, Jewish anti-Zionist groups should not be used as a blanket alibi. The fact that some Jews reject Zionism does not negate the discriminatory impact of anti-Zionist conduct on other Jews. No minority group is treated as protected only when all its members agree on the meaning of its collective identity.

Third, self-described Zionist or pro-Israel groups should also be assessed functionally, though without policing legitimate disagreement. Zionist language does not by itself settle the practical meaning of a policy agenda. The relevant question is whether particular positions affirm Jewish collective self-determination on equal terms, or subject Israel and Jewish collective life to exceptional burdens not applied to others.

Fourth, policymakers should distinguish criticism of Israeli policy from the denial or weakening of Jewish collective rights. Opposition to a particular government or military decision is legitimate. But when Jewish self-determination is treated as uniquely conditional, or when Israel's right to defend itself is subjected to standards not applied to comparable allies, the issue is no longer only disagreement over policy.

Finally, institutions should recognize that antisemitism often speaks in the moral vocabulary of its time. In different periods, Jews have been condemned in religious, racial, economic, nationalist, and revolutionary terms. Indeed, the term *antisemitism*, coined in the nineteenth century, was itself meant to distinguish modern hostility toward Jews from older religious hatred by recasting it in the language of racial science and political neutrality. Today, hostility toward Jews is often expressed through the language of anti-racism, anti-colonialism, human rights, democracy, or peace. These vocabularies are not inherently antisemitic. But neither are they inherently exculpatory. Their effects, functions, and targets must be examined.

Conclusion

The debate over anti-Zionism and antisemitism will not be resolved by asking endlessly when one "becomes" the other. That formulation too often assumes that antisemitism must announce itself in crude hatred before it can be recognized—it rarely does. Antisemitism, like other forms of discrimination, adapts to the language of the age.

For policymakers, the more useful question is not whether anti-Zionism is antisemitic in the abstract. It is whether, in practice, anti-Zionism targets Jews or Israelis, excludes Jews or Israelis, treats Jewish or Israeli institutions as proxies for the State of Israel, or denies Jews collective legitimacy. The same principle should apply to groups that claim Zionist or pro-Israel credentials: what matters is not only the label they adopt, but the consequences of the policies they advance.

In both cases, self-description is not sufficient. The task is to evaluate ideas, movements, and organizations by their practical effects on Jewish security, Jewish equality, and Israel's legitimacy as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurz, Eldad Shavit and Keri Rosenbluh