

When are Anti-Zionism and Criticism of Israel Antisemitic?

Anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel are not always antisemitic. But sometimes they are. We've put together this guide to help distinguish between when it is and when it isn't.

First, what ARE Zionism and anti-Zionism?...

There are not (and likely will never be!) universally accepted definitions of either of these terms. Here are a few generally accepted frameworks that we can start from:

Zionism:

A modern ideology rooted in the longstanding Jewish religious and cultural attachment to the Land of Israel. It affirms that the Jewish people constitute a nation with the right to exercise national self-determination in Israel, their historic homeland.

Anti-Zionism:

Originally referred to opposition to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. It has since evolved into opposition to Israel's continued existence as a specifically Jewish state, based on the contention that the oppression of Palestinians is integral to preserving Israel's Jewish character.

Remember, Zionism and anti-Zionism can mean different things to different people.

The latest Jewish Federations of North America poll makes that abundantly clear. While only 37% of adult respondents identified as Zionists, 88% believe Israel has a right to exist as a democratic, Jewish state.

Meanwhile, 80% of anti-Zionist respondents claimed “supporting whatever actions Israel takes” is a tenant of Zionism while only 15% of Zionist respondents agreed with that statement.

No belief system is monolithic. People’s understanding of each ideology and their reason for supporting or opposing them range from social to political to secular to religious. On top of that, the tensions of the last few years in particular have led a lot of people to have internal and external debates about their own long-held positions on Israel and Zionism.

Source: Kravetz, M. (2026, February 4). The “Zionism” gap: What JFNA data really shows about Jews, Israel and Zionism today. Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Anti-Zionism is not inherently antisemitic.

As with criticism of Israel, opposition to Zionism is not necessarily antisemitic. Sometimes, anti-Zionism crosses a line into antisemitic territory. It’s important to be able to distinguish between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Referring to all anti-Zionism as antisemitism distracts from addressing real instances of anti-Jewish hate and bigotry.

Anti-Zionism is antisemitic when ...

It employs antisemitic tropes:

- That can look like accusing Israel of controlling the world economy, or claiming Zionism is a plot to rule the world. It can also look like claims that Israel uses money to control global politics, or cartoons depicting Israel as a rat, octopus, bloodthirsty vampire, or puppeteer.

It posits Israel or Zionism as the root of all injustice:

- This can look like blaming Israel for global issues that are far removed from Israel, Palestine, or Zionism. Like other forms of antisemitism, it has a singular focus: if only Israel or Zionism were to disappear, all suffering in the world would be erased.

It denies Jews the right to self-determination specifically because they are Jews or singles Israel out because of its characteristics as a Jewish state:

- It's one thing to oppose Zionism because you're against countries that privilege one religion over others in general. But if you oppose Jewish nationalism in particular and for no other reason than that it is Jewish, that is antisemitic.

It denies Jews the right to define themselves as a people, and therefore denies Jews full human, civil, and religious rights, solely because they are Jews:

- Jewish identity has both religious and ethnic components. Denying either piece of this identity, thereby denying Jewish identity in its entirety, is a slippery slope for antisemitism.

Is it antisemitic to devote special attention to Zionism & Israel?

No, not necessarily. Israel attracts special attention for many reasons, e.g. because it is at the crossroads of the three major Western religions or because the U.S. is Israel's closest ally and provides \$3.8 billion annually in aid to Israel. Treating Israel differently or giving it special attention becomes antisemitic when it attacks Israel on the basis of Israel's Jewish character.

Is using “Zio” as a slur antisemitic?

While anti-Zionism isn't necessarily antisemitic, it's important to be aware that antisemitic influencers on the political extremes use coded antisemitism to infiltrate movements. “Zio” is an example of this.

First popularized by David Duke, the neo-Nazi and former leader of the KKK, “Zio” has become a common slur used to refer to Zionists and, often, Jews. But just as importantly, it is also used by these groups to cover up their antisemitism by claiming they are “anti-Zionists.” Far-right extremists have used it as a tool to recruit progressives by creating a shared language and unity in their causes.

The recent wide spread of the term on social media means there will be people who use it without antisemitic intention, but it's impossible to decouple this term from its antisemitic origins and past usage.

Why this matters

The question of whether and when anti-Zionism becomes antisemitic is important: too often, a zero-sum framing erases both the weaponization of antisemitism and the legitimacy of some critiques of Israel and Zionism.

Legitimate criticism of Israeli policies should not be smeared as antisemitic, and genuine antisemitism should not be minimized, hand-waved, or ignored. Getting this right is not an academic exercise: it is a shield against both rising hate and political exploitation.