

A Campus Guide To Identifying Antisemitism In A Time Of Perplexity

Introduction

Antisemitism is an enduring, malleable, and ancient group-targeted prejudice that assumes many different, even contradictory forms (such as that Jews are both arch-capitalists and revolutionary communists). Because of its multiplicity, some scholars argue that there is no single phenomenon that can be called antisemitism.

However, the months of campus unrest that followed October 7 require us to gain clarity about what antisemitism is and how it operates, [even in the absence of a single, universally agreed upon definition](#). In particular, the renewed and intense debates in recent months over the connection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism call for careful discussion and prudent deliberation. Key terms and slogans in the debate, such as settler-colonialism and “From the River to the Sea,” have generated starkly divergent responses that complicate a judicious review of their meaning in different contexts. This guide, which does not aspire to be an authoritative code but rather a catalyst to deeper thought, presumes that these terms contain multiple meanings to different people.

The Guide seeks to help all members of the university community make more careful distinctions between discourse that some claim to be antisemitic, while others claim to be merely political speech. Rather than presume that certain speech is or is not antisemitic, we believe this guide can help clarify a nuanced and contextualized approach to thinking about antisemitism in this current moment. At the same time, the Guide is not intended as a legal standard nor to be enshrined into law, for to do so risks weaponization that could be used to suppress or chill speech.

The Campus Guide To Identifying Antisemitism was produced by the [Nexus Task Force](#), which promotes a greater understanding of issues at the intersection of Israel and antisemitism.



Guiding Principles

1. This guide focuses on the realm of speech (rather than action). It recognizes the difficulty in making judgment calls and at the same time seeks to provide nuance in determining what speech is antisemitic and what is not.
2. Context matters. Many phrases or terms in the Guide can be antisemitic or not depending on the context, the intent with which they were uttered, and the impact with which they land. For similar reasons, this guide in its nature cannot be exhaustive. Failure to include a given case or example in this guide should not be interpreted as decisively establishing that something is, or is not, antisemitic.
3. Intent and impact are key ingredients in determining whether a statement is antisemitic, but there is no single objective tool for measuring either. Assessing them fairly requires careful deliberation, attention to context, open-mindedness, and a recognition of the difficulty of knowing what is in another person's mind.
4. To help distinguish between antisemitic speech and speech which is not antisemitic, it is important to clarify the differences between:
 - a. antisemitic speech vs. speech that is dangerous or offensive but not directed against Jews per se
 - b. antisemitic speech vs. political speech that may be hurtful but is not directed against Jews per se
5. Colleges and universities are educational institutions. Accordingly, they should first seek to address claims of antisemitism through the full array of educational tools at their disposal (e.g., classes, orientations, trainings, and informal educational settings) rather than through formal adjudicative procedures. At times when an adjudicative process cannot be avoided, it is important to recall that ambiguous words cannot be automatically presumed to carry an antisemitic meaning, absent sufficient proof. A similar measure of caution should inform statements issued in the name of colleges or their leaders.

A Note on Use

This guide seeks to provide nuance often lacking in current public debates about antisemitism, criticism of Israel, and the link between them. It is especially intended to benefit universities, which have been the site of the most contentious debates and actions in the United States around the Israel-Gaza war. It can also be used by individuals and groups who confront the question of antisemitism in their work, including educators, political leaders, policymakers, and non-profit and corporate leaders, among others. The Guide aims to contribute to a campus climate marked by open, critical engagement, as well as physical safety for all.



As a general rule, it can be said that when antisemitic tropes are used, the expression is antisemitic. It is also the case that words and actions can sometimes be antisemitic, even if not the explicit intent of the speaker. In such instances, the impact or effect of antisemitic language might be to impede Jews' ["ability to participate as equals in political, religious, cultural, economic, or social life."](#) Ideally, this guide will be used to foster mutual understanding among people with divergent points of view, so that disagreements and discussion can take place without recourse to a disciplinary process.

In addressing the question of antisemitism, there may be many cases that generate good faith disagreement. In such circumstances, the original [Nexus Document](#) recognizes that "[a]ll claims of antisemitism made by Jews, like all claims of discrimination and oppression in general, should be given serious attention." The fact of disagreement should not be a license to assume bad faith. Rather, it should represent an opportunity for nuanced and empathic discussion.

A final prefatory note: The Guide's aim is to shed light on what is and isn't antisemitism, but there is another domain of discourse heard today that is not necessarily antisemitic but can be offensive, dangerous or supportive of indiscriminate violence. The Guide recognizes the importance of identifying this discourse, even though it is not specifically directed against Jews (but rather, for example, against people deemed to be colonizers). Examples of this discourse can be found at this [link](#).

The screening questions that follow are designed to help differentiate between antisemitic and non-antisemitic expressions commonly used on university and college campuses.



Screening Questions

Traditional Antisemitic Tropes and Stereotypes

1. Does the claim or statement promote the idea of a world Jewish conspiracy or other myths, stereotypes, or negative generalizations about Jews, such as Jewish control over governments, media, banks, or other institutions?
2. Does it apply antisemitic symbols, imagery, or caricatures to the State of Israel or Zionism (see the Nexus White Paper [here](#)) or their supporters, such as ideas about Jewish world conspiracy, the omnipresence of Jewish power or financial control, or the so-called Blood Libel, which maintains that Jews kill non-Jews (most infamously, Christian children in order to make use of their blood)?
3. Does it deny or minimize the number of Jews who died in the Holocaust, or make use of Holocaust imagery (e.g., swastika) to condemn Israel?

Discrimination, Violence, and Hostility

1. Does the claim or statement advocate, defend, or promote violence against Jews or Jewish institutions?
2. Does it involve assaulting, harassing, or threatening someone because they are visibly identifiable as Jewish; attacking a synagogue or identifiable Jewish institution because it is a Jewish space; or defacing such property with antisemitic symbols such as swastikas?
3. Does it discriminate against Jews - because they are Jewish - by social exclusion or the denial of equal rights, or by subjecting them to profiling or disproportionate scrutiny?

Conflation of Jews with Israel

1. Does the claim or statement hold Jews collectively responsible for actions of the State of Israel?
2. Does it assume non-Israeli Jews are more loyal to Israel than to their own countries?
3. Does it assume that all Jews are Zionists? If so, does that equation serve to exclude, stigmatize or threaten Jews as such based on Zionism's perceived wrongs?

DOES IT PROMOTE?	DOES IT PROMOTE?	DOES IT PROMOTE?
Traditional Antisemitic Tropes and Stereotypes	Discrimination, Violence, and Hostility	The Conflation of Jews with Israel

Apartheid

In cases where the claim of apartheid is predicated on purported Jewish features of criminality or avarice, the label of apartheid is antisemitic.

Legal opinions can be and have been divided over whether apartheid conditions exist in the West Bank or even all of Israel.

Even if the claim that Israel is engaging in apartheid proves to be false, or imprecise, or reductionist, that does not necessarily mean that the claim is antisemitic. The question of whether the charge is accurate and the question of whether it is antisemitic are two separate questions.

If individuals, by dint of their being Jewish, must pledge that Israel is an “apartheid state” before being permitted to participate in an activity, this is antisemitic.

Anti-Zionist/ Zionist

Use of the term “Zionist” to refer to someone who supports the existence of the State of Israel is more likely to be an accurate description than an antisemitic trope. Objections to Zionist beliefs that are not based on stereotypes about Jews are not necessarily antisemitic.

The reliance on anti-Jewish stereotypes of Jews’ possessing disproportionate power (as in the classic antisemitic trope of a “Zionist Occupation Government” [ZOG]) is antisemitic.

Strong criticism of Israel or Zionism or calls for major, even radical, political reform, including advocating for a state that affords equal collective and legal rights to all its citizens, are not antisemitic .

Anti-Zionism is antisemitic if it denies Jews the right to self-determination while affording the same right for Palestinians, or if it denies Jews in Israel the rights to live and flourish as individuals and as a group there.

If an attack on Zionism uses the term Zionist or “Zio” to refer to a Jew and/or presumes that all Jews are Zionists and excludes or mistreats them on that basis, then anti-Zionism is antisemitic. Likewise, if an attack on Zionism targets a Jewish institution on the basis of a presumption that Jewish institutions are Zionist, that too can be antisemitic.

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“By Any Means Necessary”

On the face of it, the term “By Any Means Necessary” does not invoke traditional antisemitic tropes.

The phrase has long been understood to endorse violent forms of political resistance. Insofar as it targets Israel as a political state – and is not directed against Jews qua Jews – it is similar to other calls for political violence. As such, while it may be proscribed on other grounds as dangerous or supportive of indiscriminate violence, the phrase is not necessarily antisemitic.

In the wake of October 7, the phrase has at times represented a defense of past and future attacks on Jewish civilians that can be deemed threatening to some Jews and Israel-identified campus community members. Where “by any means necessary” represents an endorsement of terrorizing Jews qua Jews, it is antisemitic.

If the call entails targeting – rhetorically or physically – any Jewish individual or institution that has not explicitly disavowed Israel, then both the framing and the impact are antisemitic.

Calls for boycott, divestment, or other nonviolent sanctions

On the face of it, a call to boycott or divest does not promote antisemitic stereotypes.

As with other terms, if coupled with concepts that vilify Jews (e.g., that Jews control the global economy), it would be antisemitic.

On the face of it, a call to use the tool of a boycott, divestment, and sanctions is a form of nonviolent protest that is not antisemitic.

If the call functions as a vehicle for an eliminationist vision to remove all Jews from Israel or relegate Jews to second-class status within Israel, then it is antisemitic.

If a call for boycott leads to heightened scrutiny of Jews qua Jews, then it could be antisemitic.

Calls for nonviolent protest that are aimed at entities that invest in the occupied territories, are directly and materially supportive of violations of international law or human rights, or lobby on behalf of the Israel government are not antisemitic.

If supporting these calls means boycotting or otherwise excluding Jewish individuals, entities, or institutions because they are simply assumed to support Zionism or Israel; or rests on the belief that all Jews are presumed to be responsible for the actions of Israel or presumes all Jews are Zionists, then it is antisemitic.

“From the River to the Sea”

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<p>On the face of it, the term “From the River to the Sea” does not invoke traditional antisemitic tropes.</p>	<p>If the phrase conveys the aspiration for a state (or states) that grants Jews and Palestinians equal individual rights in Israel/ Palestine and recognizes their collective rights, then it is not discriminatory toward Jews.</p> <p>If the act of freeing Palestine from the (Jordan) River to the (Mediterranean) Sea entails the elimination of Jews or their relegation to second-class status, then it is an antisemitic vision.</p>	<p>On the face of it, the term itself does not conflate Jews with Israel.</p>

Genocide (see [link](#))

<p>If the charge of genocide is accompanied by claims about the distinctive nature, power or perfidy of Jews or the state of the Jews, then it is antisemitic.</p>	<p>If the charge of genocide yields a call to undertake violence against Jews, then it is antisemitic.</p>	<p>A key criterion of genocide according to the 1948 Genocide Convention is the requirement to prove “intent.” Legal opinions can and have been divided over whether Israel’s military assault on Gaza post-October 7 is genocide. The answer to the question of whether genocide has been committed depends, in this case, on the evidence one marshals in determining whether “intent” exists. It can also depend on whether one approaches the question through Israeli or Palestinian lenses.</p> <p>Even if the claim that Israel is engaging in genocide proves to be false, or imprecise, or reductionist, that does not necessarily mean that the claim is antisemitic. The question of whether the charge is accurate and the question of whether it is antisemitic are two separate questions.</p>
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Intifada

On the face of it, the term does not invoke traditional antisemitic tropes.

Intifada literally means “shaking off” in Arabic, though it has come to connote resistance to oppression and especially Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. There have been two major intifadas directed against Israel (1987 and 2000); click [here](#) to learn more.

If focused on Israelis (regardless of their ethnicity or religion) rather than Jews more globally, the call for Intifada may fall into the category of a hostile or dangerous act, but it is not necessarily antisemitic.

In cases where the call advances an eliminationist vision that requires the removal of Jewish people living in Israel, or relegates Jews to second-class status, the term or its intended political program would be antisemitic.

If the slogan “Globalize the Intifada” is understood as a call for action against Israel-connected targets outside of Israel; and if Jews or Jewish institutions are presumed to be connected to Israel and thus targets, the term would be antisemitic.

Settler Colonialism

On the face of it, the term does not invoke traditional antisemitic tropes. As with other terms, if coupled with tropes or concepts that vilify Jews (e.g., the [Great Replacement Theory](#)), it would be antisemitic.

If the phrase is used to express a critique of Zionist or Israeli displacement of Palestinians without making specific reference to Jews or Jewish traits, it is not antisemitic.

If it is used to deny Jews in Israel the right to remain in the land as full equals, then it is antisemitic. Also, if it denies or downplays Jewish origins in the land, continuous Jewish links to it over centuries, and an ongoing Jewish historical presence in the land, it is antisemitic.

If all Jews in Israel and abroad are treated as Zionist colonizers worthy of exclusion or elimination, then it is antisemitic.



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The [Nexus Task Force](#), affiliated with the [Bard Center for the Study of Hate](#), promotes a greater understanding of issues at the intersection of Israel and antisemitism. The Task Force created the [Nexus Document](#), which was embraced as a valuable tool for raising awareness and included in the [U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism](#). The Task Force is part of the [Nexus Project](#), a coalition of community leaders, activists, scholars, and clergy that equips policymakers with tools to combat antisemitism and counters efforts to exploit false accusations of antisemitism.