



Understanding Antisemitism and its Conflation with Criticism of Israel

Antisemitism is a real problem in the Commonwealth, and one that deserves serious attention. In a time when discrimination and bigotry is being platformed and emboldened nationally, the Commonwealth must protect and support our Jewish communities, alongside all communities facing increased threat to their safety. However, it is not possible in today's climate to address antisemitism without discussing the conflation of antisemitism and criticism of Israel, including opposition to Zionism as a political ideology. Given the mandate of the *Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism*, it is critical for policy makers to ensure that we do not combat antisemitism in a way that negatively impacts the rights of Palestinians, encroaches on free speech or use an understanding of antisemitism that conflates antisemitism with criticism of Israel.

What is Antisemitism?

[Antisemitism](#) is hostility, discrimination, prejudice, and violence toward Jews as Jews or Jewish institutions as Jewish. Antisemitic rhetoric and behavior hold Jews collectively responsible for societal ills or perceived evils in the world, resulting in marginalization, persecution, and violence.¹ Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Direct acts of violence against Jews for being Jewish
- Spreading conspiracy theories that Jews are especially wealthy and powerful, control global media and government, and/or will replace other peoples
- Denying or minimizing the Holocaust
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel or assuming all Jews are aligned with the state of Israel.

Like any kind of hate or discrimination in our society, anyone no matter their background or political orientation can hold antisemitic views.

What is Zionism and anti-Zionism?

Zionism can most simply be defined as the political ideology of Jewish Nationalism. Many understand Zionism as a project for self-determination of the Jewish people, and thus many Jews see it as a core aspect of their identity. For this group, anti-Zionism means opposition to a core part of their Jewish identity.

An increasing number of Jews, as well as many Palestinians and their supporters of all backgrounds, understand Zionism as a political system of inequality and oppression that in practice privileges the rights and lives of Jews in Palestine/Israel over the rights and lives of Palestinians. For this group, anti-Zionism means opposition to that political system of inequality and oppression.

It is also important to note that most people who consider themselves Zionists in America are not Jewish—there are nearly twice the number of members of a single evangelical Christian Zionist organization, Christians United for Israel (10 million) than the entire population of American Jews (approx. 5.8 million).

¹ Diaspora Alliance, *Antisemitism Explained*,

https://diasporaalliance.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/What-is-Antisemitism_-Diaspora-Alliance-.pdf

Many Christian Evangelicals who identify as Zionist believe in a theology wherein Jews need to return to the land of Israel in order for the second coming of the messiah to occur, at that point Jewish people would be forced to either convert or be killed. This is an antisemitic idea. It is thus possible to hold Zionist ideology and also harbor antisemitic views, another reason it is important to avoid conflating the two ideas.

Part of the complexity and controversy that comes with the conversation around the relationship between anti-Zionism and antisemitism is the vastly divergent associations these different groups have with the words “Zionism” and “anti-Zionism.” There is no shared understanding of these words within the Jewish community in Massachusetts, let alone in the Commonwealth more broadly.

Why is it important for policy makers to resist the conflation of antisemitism and criticism of Israel?

In today’s national political climate, we have seen accusations of antisemitism that rely on the blanket conflation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and even criticism of Israeli government actions more broadly. These accusations have been misused and misappropriated to advance reactionary and repressive politics, such as detaining visa-holding political activists and cutting funding from universities. Such policies claim to protect Jews while dangerously endorsing an antagonism between the human rights and safety of Jewish people, on the one hand, and the human rights and safety of other marginalized groups, on the other. This in turn, has the potential to actually increase antisemitism by isolating Jewish communities from their neighbors.

Many academics and experts have worked to parse out the difference between antisemitic speech in the context of Israel/Palestine, and speech that is critical of the State of Israel and/or Zionism as a political ideology but not antisemitic. For examples, please see the Nexus Project and the Jerusalem Definition of Antisemitism. **It is not the Commonwealth’s role to adjudicate the differences of opinion within the Jewish community and among scholars of antisemitism.**

Recommendations to the Legislature

- **Address antisemitism within a framework of safety and freedom for everyone.** Historically, societies where Jewish communities have thrived with lower incidences of antisemitism are societies that have had strong rights and protections for all minority groups. Meaningfully combating antisemitism must include both fighting antisemitism and fighting its sibling hatreds: racism, Islamophobia, White Nationalism, and xenophobia, as well as addressing the underlying conditions, such as economic inequality, that help fuel antisemitic conspiracy theories.
- **Defend our democracy against those who seek to undermine our civil rights.** Constitutionally protected free speech is a foundational civil liberty that makes our communities safer and stronger. Criticism of Israel, including opposition to Zionism as a political ideology, is not inherently antisemitic, and painting all pro-Palestine and anti-Zionist speech as such undermines both our ability to discern and dismantle actual antisemitism and our ability to advocate for the safety and freedom of all people in Israel/Palestine.
- **Reject policy, K-12 curriculum recommendations and legislation** that directly conflate anti-Zionism and antisemitism, such as recommendations that are based on the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of antisemitism, or that use the false pretext of Jewish safety as a Trojan horse for a crackdown on civil, political and human rights.