

# What *Is* Anti-Semitism?

Bernard Harrison

Is *any* criticism of Israel anti-Semitic? That is the issue over which the two sides in the debate over anti-Semitism in the Labour Party most fundamentally divide. One side, which includes many Jews, thinks that while some criticisms of Israel are “legitimate”, others display anti-Semitic prejudice. The other finds any such distinction bogus: according to it, all criticism of Israel is “political”, and deserves the legal protection which law in a free society accords to political discourse.

This second view is by no means confined to the hard left and the BDS (“Boycott, Delegation, Sanctions”) movement. It commands support among senior members of the legal profession. Sir Stephen Sedley, for example, embraces it in a recent essay, “Defining Anti-Semitism”, in the *London Review of Books*.

“Shorn of philosophical and political refinements, anti-Semitism is hostility towards Jews as Jews. Where it manifests itself in discriminatory acts or inflammatory speech it is generally illegal, lying beyond the bounds of freedom of speech and of action. By contrast, criticism (and equally defense) of Israel or of Zionism is not only generally lawful: it is affirmatively protected by law. Endeavours to conflate the two by characterising anything other than anodyne criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic are not new. What is new is the adoption by the UK government (and the Labour Party) of a definition of anti-semitism which endorses the conflation.”<sup>1</sup>

Suppose we accept Sedley’s thumbnail definition of anti-Semitism – “hostility to Jews as Jews” as sound and exhaustive. Then it follows necessarily that no criticism of Israel or Zionism can be anti-Semitic unless it can be shown to express, or to be motivated by, not merely hostility to the State of Israel, or to its government, or to its founding beliefs, *but also hostility to individual Jews in general, as Jews*. And it appears, at least, as if any such imputation can be avoided simply by formally disowning it: by distinguishing one’s own, legitimate (because purely “political”) hostility to Israel or Zionism, from the undoubted anti-Semitism of someone who, holding similar views about either, makes those views an excuse for attacking, physically or otherwise, individual Jews “as Jews.”

So far, so good – provided Sedley’s definition is both sound and exhaustive. But is it? A definition of a general term – “anti-Semitism,” let’s say – is sound if it identifies a kind of thing justly describable by that term. It is exhaustive if it identifies the *only* kind of thing justly describable by that term. No doubt Sedley’s definition is sound: one of the kinds of thing we use the term “anti-Semitism” to describe is, indeed, a certain kind of mental state or disposition; one consisting in settled hostility to Jews as Jews.

But is Sedley’s definition exhaustive? Are there, perhaps, other sorts of entity, not mental states or emotional dispositions, but quite other kinds of thing, that the term “anti-Semitism” may *also* justly be held to describe or designate? Here the plot thickens. For there exists just such an entity. The word “anti-Semitism” has been

used, indifferently, since its invention by the German agitator and publicist Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904), to designate two quite different kinds of thing. One is indeed an emotional disposition: one consisting in hostility to individual Jews as Jews. The other is a body of pseudo-explanatory theory concerning the Jewish community considered as a supposedly coherently organised and unified political force, "The Jews," and the supposedly crucial role holders of the theory imagine this force to play in the direction of world affairs.

The main lines of the theory are familiar enough. "The Jews" are an alien people, with a profoundly "particularist" religion which attaches supreme cosmic significance to the welfare of Jews and none at all to that of non-Jews. Jews are gifted with immense financial acumen, and conspiratorially organised in ways that allow them to employ that acumen to hollow out and seize control over a multitude of non-Jewish organizations – among them, in anti-Semitic imaginings, the banks, Hollywood, the US State Department, and the US Presidency. These organizations, although they may continue to appear, to the trusting and simple minded, non-Jewish in character and goals, have actually been perverted, the theory maintains, to serve the purposes of the Jewish Conspiracy. Those purposes are profoundly evil, and utterly destructive to the peace and welfare of the non-Jewish world. Jews have been single-handedly responsible for all the wars, revolutions and economic crises that the non-Jewish world has suffered for centuries. It follows – so the theory teaches – that if only the Jews could be got rid of, non-Jewish life would immediately return to the permanent state of peace, order and economic success to which the evident virtues of non-Jews plainly entitle them.

Elsewhere I have called this theory "political anti-Semitism," to distinguish it from what I call "social anti-Semitism", which is not a *theory* of any kind, but rather a state of mind: Sedley's "hostility to Jews as Jews." Political anti-Semitism has an emotional tone of its own, but it is a different emotional tone from that of social anti-Semitism. Social anti-Semitism feeds on personal dislike and contempt for individual Jews, but seldom involves *fear* of Jews as a group. Natural self-regard, after all, disinclines us to *fear* those we regard as grossly inferior to ourselves. Political anti-Semitism, on the other hand feeds precisely on fear, not to say panic: fear of the hidden threat constituted by the arcane financial and conspiratorial power wielded by "The Jews" considered not as a mere collection of unpleasant and contemptible individuals, but as a supposedly collectively organised force in world affairs. Sartre, in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, writing of the anti-Semitism of the French writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline, nicely captures this brooding sense of imminent peril. "Anti-Semitism is . . . a form of Manichaeism. It explains the course of the world by the struggle of the Principle of Good with the Principle of Evil. . . . Look at Céline: his vision of the universe is catastrophic. The Jew is everywhere, the earth is lost, it is up to the Aryan not to compromise, never to make peace. . . ."

That the Nazis both accepted and vigorously disseminated the main doctrines of political anti-Semitism, as summarised above, can easily be verified from the Nazi propaganda sheet *Der Stürmer*. No doubt, to the Nazi sympathisers who formed the main readership of *Der Stürmer*, what it offered was not "propaganda," but rather a fair and timely exposé of the dangers facing Germany from the imagined power of International Jewry. We, enjoying the gift of hindsight, can see that they were wrong. Political anti-Semitism is a fantasy. The Jews are a small people, deeply divided in

both political and religious terms. There neither is nor could be, any such thing as the vast, organised Jewish Conspiracy imagined by the political anti-Semite. Jewish influence over world affairs was and is minimal. The absence of the Jews, though it might well diminish the splendours and pleasures of the non-Jewish world, would make no difference whatsoever to its miseries.

Nevertheless, the leading doctrines of political anti-Semitism were widely believed. And the wide belief they enjoyed proved fatal to the vast majority of European Jews. Political anti-Semitism, in other words, is potentially lethal, in ways in which a merely social anti-Semitism is not. One does not go to the expense and trouble of liquidating very large numbers of people because one happens to dislike and despise them. One does it because one fears them. The growth of political anti-Semitism in Europe from the late nineteenth century onwards gradually fixed in many simple people's minds the insane idea that their Jewish neighbours belonged secretly to a worldwide conspiracy whose activities threatened everything that they, the simple people, believed in. Without the spread of such mass delusions, not solely the work of the Nazis but industriously encouraged by them, it is difficult to see how the Holocaust could have taken place.

It seems not unreasonable, therefore, to describe as criminal the deliberate elaboration and dissemination of such delusions. But what sort of crime is involved? Is it an instance of what we have come to call "hate crime"? According to the website of the Citizens Advice Service, "Hate incidents and hate crime [*sic*] are acts of violence or hostility directed at people because of who they are or who someone thinks they are."

The trouble with this is that the political anti-Semite in search of converts to his view may be too smooth a character to offer "acts of violence or hostility" to any individual. Such acts may even be foreign to his nature. His purpose is not to abuse or affront any one, but simply to awaken his fellow-citizens to the alarming nature of the threat he and they face from the activities of the Jewish Conspiracy. Hence, though belief in the doctrines of political anti-Semitism may be plentifully productive of hate crimes, it is difficult to see how the mere defence and encouragement of such beliefs, could reasonably be construed as *itself* constituting a hate crime.

If the dissemination of political anti-Semitism cannot, or cannot necessarily, be construed as a hate crime, does it then follow that it must be construed as a political act deserving the protection that the commitment of British law to freedom of speech affords to political discourse in general? Again -- not necessarily. Both common and statute law limit freedom of speech in the case of defamation. Consulting the Web -- specifically, the website of corporate lawyers Blake Morgan, -- one finds the following "brief guide to the tort of defamation:"

Defamation occurs when there is a publication to a third party of words or matters containing an untrue imputation against the reputation of individuals, companies or firms which serve to undermine such reputation in the eyes of right thinking members of society generally, by exposing the victim to hatred, contempt or ridicule.

The tort of defamation acts to redress unjustified injury to the claimant's reputation and can be divided into two areas, slander and libel. Slander is the publication of defamatory words or actions in a temporary form, for example by spoken word. Libel is the publication of defamatory materials in permanent form.

Political anti-Semitism is, plainly, a tissue of defamatory falsehoods. Its dissemination, whether as slander or libel, plainly exposes an entire community not only to hatred and contempt, but to personal attack from those who take it seriously. A clear line separates it, as collective defamation, from rational political discourse deserving the protection of legislation guaranteeing freedom of speech.

It has become conventional to assume that political anti-Semitism, as sketched above, was a delusion confined to the Nazi party: one that for that reason became briefly significant in the 30s and 40s of the last century, but that has since ceased to play any important role in world affairs. That comforting illusion can be dispelled in many ways: for example by close attention to the speeches of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, President of Iran 2005-2013. But it is more or less true that until quite recently political anti-Semitism, with the exception of certain tiny groups on the extreme right and left of politics, and a certain number of writers and intellectuals, played very little part in British life. For the most part British anti-Semitism has generally taken the form of social anti-Semitism: hostility to Jews as Jews.

Of late years that has changed. Since 1967 and the Six Day War that left in Israeli hands what was then Jordanian territory but has since been known as the Occupied Territories, or the West Bank, hostility to Israel has become a defining characteristic of left-wing opinion across the West. Given the nature of left-wing politics, any issue important to the Left tends to take on the status of a moral crusade. A further incentive to moralise the question of Israel stems from the wide appeal, to many, perhaps most, sections of the Western Left, of the proposition that Israel is in some sense an “illegitimate” state, one which should never have been allowed to come into existence. Much evidence suggests that those who favour that view would not find any difficulty in welcoming the existence of a state within the same borders as Israel, provided it were one possessing an Arab-majority, and presumably also Muslim-majority, population and government. What is supposedly “illegitimate” about Israel comes down, therefore, to the fact that it is a Jewish-majority state.

Some plausible backing must, plainly, be found for the claim that the continued existence of Jewish majority rule in Israel is morally intolerable. Matters here are complicated by the fact that Israel is the only state in the world whose right to exist as a state is seriously questioned by a substantial body of opinion. Hence it will not do merely to claim that whatever “crimes” are alleged of Israel be grave ones. What is required is that they be worse – much worse – than those of any of the many states whose legitimacy is never called into question by the Western Left or for that matter by anybody else.

This proposal numbers among its supporters some distinguished academics in literary studies. Jacqueline Rose, for instance, Professor of English at Queen Mary College, University of London, catches the general spirit of this line of “anti-Zionist” rhetoric on p.115-116 of her 2005 *The Question of Zion* (Princeton): “How did one of the most persecuted peoples of the world come to embody some of the worst cruelties of the modern nation-state?” But the dedicatee of Rose’s book, the late Edward Said, had already upped the ante still further – indeed, to the limit -- in an interview published in 1989 in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, describing Israel’s occupation of the

West Bank and (at that time) of Gaza, as “in severity and outright cruelty more than rivaling any other military occupations in modern history.”

“Modern history” and “the modern nation state,” however, offer panoramas of tyranny and cruelty wide enough to render difficult any rational defence of claims as global as this concerning one small state in the Middle East. Much is made of the civilian losses entailed by the repeated small wars, none lasting more than a few days or weeks, in which Israel has been required to engage in order to defend itself from attack, in Gaza, Lebanon and elsewhere. But nothing of this nature of which Israel can plausibly be accused comes anywhere near approaching, let alone exceeding, the levels of atrocity attributable to other actors in the very much vaster, more enduring and more savage conflicts – the Iran/Iraq war, the first and second Iraq wars, the Syrian civil war and now the war in Yemen – that have consumed the entire region with increasing frequency since the abrogation by Iraq in 1980 of the Algiers Accord.

No doubt because of this, what one might call the thesis of the *moral exceptionalism* of Israel is never advanced on the back of factually detailed comparisons with the conduct of other states in the region, let alone with the broader perspectives offered by the modern nation state or modern history in general. It is advanced, rather, by means of the constant repetition, in political literature and speeches, along with the text and iconography of banners carried at demonstrations, of a small set of essentially formulaic accusations associating Israel with things widely accepted, across broad swathes of left-wing opinion, as constituting the depths of human depravity. Thus, for example, Israel is accused of being a “Nazi state,” an “Apartheid state,” a “racist state,” and (both in its origin and in its present conduct) a “colonial-settler state”.

Considered as a candidate for any of these descriptions, Israel falls at the first hurdle. Israel is not a “Nazi state,” because its government (unlike that of the late Saddam Hussein in Iraq, for instance, or for that matter that of Bashar al-Assad in Syria) is not in the hands of a single political party obedient to an inspired leader and committed to enforcing policies in broad alignment with those of the former *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*. It is not an Apartheid state because it altogether lacks the legal and social apparatus of racial separation that characterised the Apartheid regime in South Africa. It is not a “racist” state because its Jewish population embraces Jews of all racial origins and colours, and for that matter because its citizens, are only about 70% Jewish, the remainder being Arab, both Muslim and Christian, Druse, Circassian and others. There are Arab Israeli Members of the Knesset and Arab Ministers of Government. Many Druse, some Christian Arabs and a few Muslims choose to serve in the IDF. It is not a “colonial-settler” state because it did not come into being as a result of any European project of colonialism, but as the result of the Jewish population of Palestine establishing its right to political autonomy in the face of an attempt, from which the European powers stood aloof, to exterminate it or drive it from the land by military force.

These accusations, in short, make no contribution to serious political debate. Rather, they are sonorous but empty phrases, good only for hurling at demonstrations or the rowdier kind of meeting. They are also defamatory, in the strict legal sense of falsehoods calculated to undermine the reputation of the victim and to expose him or her to hatred and contempt.

But might one not argue that, even if such accusations are, strictly speaking, defamatory, those defamed by them are not *Jews as such*, but rather *supporters of Israel*, be they Jewish or non-Jewish? Sadly, the forensic plausibility of this objection greatly exceeds its contact with reality. Polls show, in the US a large proportion of evangelical Christians and Republicans, as well as a smaller proportion of Democrats; in the UK a large proportion of Conservative voters as well as smaller numbers of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters, to be supportive of Israel. Hence, very possibly, the numbers of pro-Israel non-Jews may greatly exceed those of pro-Israel Jews. Furthermore, on both sides of the Atlantic, a certain stratum of Jewish opinion is hostile to Israel, even to the extent of sympathising with BDS.

Possibly these facts are not widely understood. In any event their influence on public opinion seems slight. Israel is generally, and more particularly on the Left, perceived as a Jewish enterprise, enjoying overseas support virtually exclusively from Jews. To those who perceive supporting Israel as to all intents and purposes equivalent to supporting Nazism, racism, colonialism and apartheid, those whom they see as manifesting this strikingly unpleasant combination of commitments are virtually exclusively – Jews! When, in 2016, Alex Chalmers, the co-Chair of the Oxford University Labour Club (the largest student Labour group in the country) resigned, he did so, because according to his widely published statement, both OULC and a large proportion of the student Left “have some kind of problem with Jews.” Not, that is to say, with “supporters of Israel,” but with Jews viewed as intrinsically in league -- “as Jews” --- with the evils that wide sections of the Left perceive Israel as representing and promoting.

In effect we have here a recrudescence of the central thesis of political anti-Semitism: that the goals pursued by “the Jews” are profoundly evil and destructive ones. When to this one adds to this three other claims that presently attract support not only on the remoter tracts of left-wing opinion but on the liberal-left in general --

- that the “Israel lobby” in the United States is so strong, and so well-supported by Jewish money that American political institutions, including the State Department and the Oval Office, are powerless against it (in other words, that a “Jewish conspiracy” actually exists);
- that the existence of Israel represents a permanent threat to world peace (in other words that a new world war, is it were to occur, would be, like “all wars,” the fault of “the Jews”); and
- that the existence of Jewish political autonomy in Israel represents the only serious obstacle to a peaceful settlement of the Israel/Palestinian conflict that would protect the rights of all participants, including Jews (in other words, that if it were not for the obstinacy of “the Jews” in their eternally “particularist” pursuit of their sectional interests, there would have been no problem in the first place)

-- there seems little option but to conclude that we are witnessing a recrudescence of a version of political (i.e. theoretical, pseudo-intellectual) anti-Semitism that differs little in its main theses from the version disseminated by the Nazis. The new version represents itself, it is true, as directed not against Jews *as such*, but rather against the existence, and the “legitimacy,” of *the Jewish state*. And in this way it is thought to allow its supporters to claim that they are not *anti-Semites*,

at least in the sense identified by Sir Stephen Sedley, of persons animated by “hostility to Jews as Jews.”

Three things, however, obstruct the passage of this disclaimer. First, given that Israel is in fact supported by many Jews, and is in any case widely believed to be supported by most Jews, one cannot, in both spoken and written material of a defamatory character, identify support for Israel with support for Nazism, racism, colonialism and war without publicly defaming *Jews as Jews*.

Second, political activity, some of it threatening or actually violent, on the part of student groups and others politically hostile to Israel, tends in fact to target Jewish rather than non-Jewish supporters of Israel. This was evident enough in the barrage of abuse on social media, death-threats and so on, endured at the height of the recent controversy over anti-Semitism in the Labour Party by various Jewish Labour MPs. It was, for instance, the Jewish MP Luciana Berger who was forced by threats of this kind from “activists” on social media to request police protection at the Labour Party Conference in 2018. Not one of the many non-Jewish members of Labour Friends of Israel was given reason of that kind to seek similar protection.

Third, if what we are dealing with is *political* anti-Semitism – anti-Semitism as a type of pseudo-explanatory theory -- then to establish that this or that act, speech, pamphlet or tweet is anti-Semitic *in that sense* it is quite unnecessary to enquire into the motives, or more generally the mental states, of the actor or writer (to enquire, for example, whether his/her acts were motivated by a private and inner “hostility to Jews as Jews”). All that need be established, as in any case of slander or libel, is that the matter concerned involved the circulation of falsehoods likely to be publicly understood, if believed, as defamatory; and that the falsehoods in question were specifically defamatory to Jews as Jews.

In 2016, the British Government adopted a definition of anti-Semitism proposed by (among other bodies) the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (the so called “IHRA Definition”) that does identify certain claims concerning Israel as anti-Semitic. After considerable pressure the Labour Party in 2018, though with certain reservations, followed suit. This is the definition that Sir Stephen Sedley considers to conflate, illegitimately, criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism in his favoured sense of a type of sectional hostility: “hostility to Jews as Jews.”

Nor is Sir Stephen Sedley alone in this. Recently two leading British human rights lawyers, Hugh Tomlinson QC and Geoffrey Robertson QC, have prepared, on separate occasions and for different organizations, opinions on the legal viability of the IHRA definition as a means of restraining criticism of Israel. (The text of both is at present freely and fully available on the Internet.) The IHRA definition was, it must be said, never designed to function as a legal instrument. It was originally devised in 2004, by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), as an attempt to formulate a common standard for different bodies engaged in monitoring and counting anti-Semitic incidents. It consists of an initial attempt to specify *what anti-Semitism is*, that in both the initial and all subsequent versions of the definition, including the IHRA version, reads:

**Anti-Semitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.**

This opening characterisation of the nature of anti-Semitism is followed by a list of eleven “examples” of acts or utterances that may reasonably be considered anti-Semitic in character. Five of these involve references of one kind or another to Israel, and it is these that fuel controversy concerning the validity of the definition.

Robertson’s and Tomlinson’s opinions share two fundamental doubts concerning the definition. First they point out that, since the opening characterisation of Anti-Semitism characterises it as a mental or emotional disposition (“a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred of Jews”), any attempt to prosecute an act or utterance as antisemitic under the terms of the IHRA Definition would have to show, in order to succeed, that the act or utterance in question proceeded from, or was motivated by, a mental disposition of that type. And while that might be easy enough in cases conforming, for instance, to the terms of Example 1 in the Definition (“Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology, or an extremist view of religion”), the opposite might be true in cases corresponding to the terms of other cited examples (for instance, Example 7: “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour.”)

Robertson’s and Tomlinson’s second doubt, which they share with Sir Stephen Sedley (not to mention critics in the USA, where versions of the Definition have also been widely adopted by governmental institutions) concerns the possible threat posed by the Definition to freedom of speech, as guaranteed *inter alia* by Article 10 of the European Convention in Human Rights:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to retrieve and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.”

Geoffrey Robertson, in particular, sees this threat as arising, not merely because of the looseness of connection between the Definition’s initial characterisation of the nature of anti-Semitism and those of its examples (number 7 above, for instance) that mention Israel, but because of the size of the legal costs likely to be faced by institutions defending their members’ rights to make kinds of political intervention that should, in a free society, be defended rather than undermined by the law.

While it is true that the European Convention protects free speech, that is a protection offered by the courts in what is termed “judicial review” of the actions of public authorities. Like all cases that end in court, this can be very expensive even if you win – costs only cover part of your legal expenses. For cash-strapped NGOs and student organisations, this is obviously a deterrent when faced with threats of legal action which require an expensive legal defence to protect their fundamental right to criticise Israel when it is unjustifiably limited by the application of the IHRA definition and its examples.<sup>2</sup>

Robertson’s and Tomlinson’s objections, like Sir Stephen Sedley’s, are serious and important ones, and demand an equally serious answer. In this article I have tried to indicate how the outlines of such an answer might go. On the one hand, I have



suggested, we delude ourselves if we suppose that the nature of anti-Semitism is fully or exhaustively captured, either by the opening statement of the IHRA document, or by Sir Stephen Sedley's thumbnail definition, both of which make it out to be a mental disposition, a state of mind, *and only that*. That, I have suggested, is at best a half-truth. Anti-Semitism can indeed manifest itself as a state of mind: as hostility and contempt towards individual Jews *as Jews*. But it can also manifest itself as a delusive pseudo-explanatory theory concerning the alleged quasi-demonic powers and goals of the Jewish *community*, together with its alleged power to manipulate world events, in its own interests, towards outcomes that would, it is imagined, never have come to pass were it not for Jewish malignity.

The six "examples" listed by the IHRA definition that in one way or another allude to features of current political debate concerning Israel read as follows:

- 2. Making mendacious, dehumanising, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such, or the power of Jews as collective – such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.**
- 6. Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.**
- 7. Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour.**
- 8. Applying double standards by requiring of it [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.**
- 10. Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.**
- 11. Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.**

Evidently these examples are far from disallowing "all but anodyne" criticism of Israel, let alone criticism of Israel *per se*. The list of things they identify as *prima facie* anti-Semitic is a very short one: denying the right of the Jewish people to exercise political autonomy; describing Israel as an essentially racist or Nazi state; asserting the existence of a Jewish Conspiracy; asserting support for Israel on the part of non-Israeli Jews to argue disloyalty to their actual nations of citizenship; and, finally, the singling out of Israel for condemnation in respect of conduct passed over or condoned in other nations.

For the reasons examined earlier – essentially, the extreme generality of these charges, together with their incompatibility with evident matters of fact concerning Israel -- I suggest that what we confront in these "criticisms" is not political debate, but rather political defamation. More specifically, they represent types of defamatory falsehood characteristic of political anti-Semitism. It is, after all, only intelligible to deny the right of the Jewish people, alone among the nations of the world, to exercise political autonomy if there is some good reason why they should be denied it. That reason can only rest in the supposed commitment of "the Jews" to harming the interests of others on an altogether overwhelming scale that has always formed the central plank of anti-Semitism considered as a delusive explanatory theory. Other claims in the short list stigmatised as anti-Semitic by the IHRA examples, such as the claim that Israel is a "Nazi" or "racist" state, are a familiar element in efforts on the part of present-day "anti-Zionists" to persuade sympathisers of the possibility of rooting that central contention in reality. As we have already argued, none of these claims can be defended by the sober recitation of facts. Hence the goal of

“delegitimizing” Israel| can only be pursued by means of the remaining two elements in Natan Sharansky’s famous “3 D’s” test for distinguishing legitimate criticism of Israel from anti-Semitic defamation. Delegitimation, that is to say, can only be made plausible by way of demonization and double standards. Similarly, belief in the existence of a Jewish Conspiracy, rehearsed of late years as the claim that the activities of the Israel Lobby in the United States are a) conspiratorial in character and b) opposed to the national interest of the United States, is a familiar element in any version of political anti-Semitism, as is the closely related belief that Jews *by their nature* operate, in effect, as agents of a foreign power.

It is often imagined that Jews object to the propagation of such views either because they wish to silence “all criticism of Israel”, or because they are simply “offended”. If one believes that, it is easy to conclude that no valid argument can justify denying their propagators the protection of the law governing freedom of speech. Thus Sir Stephen Sedley, noting in passing that the right of free expression under Article 10 of the European Convention is not unqualified, but “can be abrogated or restricted where to do so is lawful, proportionate and necessary for (among other things) public safety, the prevention of disorder or the protection of the rights of others”, is careful – and of course correct – to add that “These qualifications do not include a right not to be offended.”

For that reason it is important to note that, for concerned Jews (and others) where the types of “criticism” of Israel singled out by the IHRA examples as *prima-facie* antisemitic are concerned, “offense” is not the issue. The problem is, rather, that in the case of charges of the kinds thus singled out we are dealing, not with valid political debate concerning the rights and wrongs of Middle Eastern politics, but rather with the collective defamation and demonization of the Jewish community, by its being represented, in effect, as a community united in support of Nazism, racism, colonialism and war, and as a potentially traitorous Israeli fifth column. These are exactly the kind of charges that fuelled, in pre-War Europe, the widespread climate of hostility to Jews that culminated in the Holocaust; and many Jews, having understandably long memory, see no reason why they should not do so again.

The Labour Party is presently accused of institutional anti-Semitism for a number of reasons, but prominent among them is the jolt that its recent actions gave to precisely such memories. In July 2018, after much public criticism, Labour’s National Executive Committee endorsed the IHRA Definition. But its endorsement excluded several of the examples to which I have devoted space here, notably the following: accusing Jewish people of being more loyal to Israel than to their home country; claiming that Israel’s existence as a state is a racist endeavour; and likening Israeli politics to those of the Nazis. In September the NEC revisited the issue, and this time accepted the IHRA Definition in full, but with a caveat asserting the need to preserve free speech on controversial issues to do with the Israel-Palestine conflict.

But by this point the damage had been done. That same month (September) a poll by the London *Jewish Chronicle* found that 38.53% of British Jews would seriously consider emigrating if Jeremy Corbyn were to become prime minister. Jews know, of course, a great deal about the nature and consequences of anti-Semitism. Is it not perhaps time for us – I have in mind the vast majority of British people not of one mind with the tiny circle for whom “anti-Zionism” has become a badge of

political belonging – to make some effort to get up to speed on the topic? We might be wise to do so, not only for the sake of our Jewish neighbours, but also for our own. As we know, political madness is all too apt to begin with the Jews. It seldom ends with them.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Stephen Sedley, "Defining Anti-Semitism," *London Review of Books*, v.39, No.9, 4 May 2017

<sup>2</sup> Robertson, p.23