

# Outspoken Palestinians - Transformed Into Antisemites Simply Because They Call for Peace

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*An attack on a prominent British-Palestinian doctor and academic, **Ghada Karmi**, by a self-styled “antisemitism watchdog” looks suspiciously like a new trend in anti-Palestinian bigotry and bullying dressed up as victimhood.*

Late last month, the Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA), which claims to represent the interests of the UK’s Jewish community, said it was writing to the General Medical Council and Exeter University to [accuse](#) Karmi of making “a series of antisemitic statements”.

The supposedly racist comments were contained in an [opinion piece](#) in Middle East Eye that praised Jeremy Corbyn’s record – and his decades of support for the Palestinian cause – as he stepped down as Labour leader.

It is hard not to conclude that the CAA wishes to make an example of Karmi, in the hope that she can be stripped of her medical licence and disowned by Exeter University, where she was previously an honorary research fellow.

More widely, this kind of public pillorying – familiar from pro-Israel lobby groups in the United States – is designed to chill free speech and delegitimise Palestinians trying to give voice to their people’s oppression.

## Targeting Palestinians

The smears suggest that groups such as the CAA have been buoyed by their success in using antisemitism to [damage](#) Corbyn. He faced four years of relentless claims that the party had become “institutionally antisemitic” on his watch.

Now, the CAA appears to be moving on from simply maligning those who have offered solidarity to Palestinians – protesting their decades of oppression at Israel’s hands – to target Palestinians directly.

It is a sign of the pro-Israel lobby’s growing confidence that it has chosen to smear Karmi. She is one of a shrinking number of Palestinians alive today who [experienced](#) firsthand the Nakba, or “catastrophe” – Israel’s ethnic cleansing in 1948 of many hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to create a self-declared Jewish state on the ruins of their homeland.

Forced from her home in Jerusalem by the Israeli army, Karmi and her family eventually settled in the UK.

## **‘Undue panic and alarm’**

The CAA has enjoyed a rapid rise to prominence and influence since it was established six years ago to challenge what it claimed at the time was an upsurge of antisemitism in the wake of Israel’s 2014 military assault on Gaza. More than 500 children were among some 2,200 Palestinians [killed](#) in the operation.

Back then, and despite being registered as a charity, the CAA’s founders did not hide the fact that it was an openly partisan organisation trying to prevent criticism of Israel by manipulating the meaning of antisemitism for political ends.

It actively sought to blur the distinction between genuine antisemitism – such as verbal and physical attacks on Jews – and the inevitable climate of intensified criticism of Israel provoked by the Gaza assault.

In early 2015, an all-party parliamentary inquiry into antisemitism accused the CAA of stoking “undue panic and alarm”, and [warned](#) it not to “conflate concerns about activity legitimately protesting Israel’s actions with antisemitism”.

Another more venerable Jewish think tank, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, [called](#) the CAA’s surveys on antisemitism “irresponsible” and “littered with flaws”.

## **Fortunes change**

The CAA’s fortunes started to change a few months later, however, when Corbyn was elected Labour leader in the summer of 2015.

The media and Corbyn’s opponents within his own party – including senior party staff still deeply committed to the centrist worldview of former Labour leader Tony Blair – were desperate to find ways to undermine Corbyn, as a recently leaked internal investigation [revealed](#).

Pro-Israel lobby groups such as the CAA, which feared Corbyn’s pro-Palestinian activism, were soon propelled to centre stage. The once well-established distinction between antisemitism and determined criticism of Israel was swept aside.

The CAA blazed a path that other, more establishment Jewish organisations, such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews, were happy to [follow](#), given their support for Israel and opposition to Corbyn.

Accusations once deemed “irresponsible” soon became routine, with Corbyn’s party roundly attacked for being “institutionally antisemitic” – despite the [lack](#) of any actual data to uphold such a claim.

## **Antisemitism ‘denial’**

Through 2018, there were a series of [rallies](#) in London against Corbyn under the banner “Enough is Enough” and “For the Many Not the Jew” – a corruption of Labour’s “For the Many Not the Few” slogan.

Shortly afterwards, the CAA worked with the Jewish Labour Movement, a fervently pro-Israel lobby group within Labour, to get the Equalities and Human Rights Commission

to [investigate](#) the party. A decision on their claim, which falsely alleges Labour has a graver antisemitism problem than other major parties, is still awaited.

Crucial to this strategy was to find a way to formally redefine antisemitism in a way that would include critics of Israel. That moment arrived with the drafting of a controversial new “[working definition](#)” of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). It shifted the emphasis from hatred of Jews to focus on criticism of Israel and opposition to Zionism, Israel’s political ideology.

Soon, even the main author of the IHRA’s definition, Kenneth Stern, came to express [regrets](#) that his work was being “subverted” and weaponised to silence criticism of Israel. Nonetheless, under pressure from groups such as the CAA, Labour [adopted](#) the new definition of antisemitism in September 2018.

Since then, Labour members have found themselves at risk of being suspended or expelled if they criticise Israel, object to the definition, or suggest it is being misused to silence Palestinians and their supporters. The latter have found themselves [labelled](#) as antisemitism “denialists” – an offence now equated to Holocaust denial.

### **No debate about Israel**

There are many problems with the IHRA’s recent reformulation of antisemitism. Perhaps most obviously, a majority of its 11 examples of potentially antisemitic attitudes or behaviours relate to Israel, not Jews. In the words of the IHRA definition, for example, it may be antisemitic to present Israel as “a racist endeavour”.

According to the enforcers of this definition, decades of Israel’s blatantly racist policies towards Palestinians can be attributed solely to foolishness or shortsightedness. Make the case that there may be something more inherent in Israel’s approach – something reminiscent of the segregationist and ethnic exclusivist ideas that underpinned apartheid South Africa – and you will be cast out of respectable society as an antisemite.

The denial of a basic right to debate Israel’s character as a Jewish state and the future for Palestinians has happened at the worst possible moment. The new Israeli government has vowed to begin [annexing](#) many of the last fragments of the occupied territories, destroying any hopes of a Palestinian state.

With Corbyn gone, Labour appears to have given up the fight on the Palestinian cause. Its new leader, Keir Starmer, has [declared](#) himself a supporter of Zionism “without qualification” and signed up to a so-called list of “10 Pledges” from pro-Israel lobbyists that highly [circumscribe](#) the right to speak freely about Israel.

### **Reign of terror**

Labour activists may have the luxury to “move on”, but for a Palestinian such as Ghada Karmi, the battle to end Israel’s oppression of her people cannot be so easily jettisoned. This is the danger the pro-Israel lobby in the UK has now identified and is turning its attention to.

The CAA has accused Karmi of antisemitism by further twisting the already sweeping and misleading provisions of the new IHRA definition.

In the US, the pro-Israel lobby has a wealth of experience in limiting the scope for criticising Israel, with a particular [emphasis](#) in recent years on academia, where support for an international boycott movement against Israel and in solidarity with Palestinians briefly flourished.

Since 2014, Palestinian and Arab professors and students in the US, as well as their supporters, have been living under a reign of terror from a shadowy website called [Canary Mission](#).

The website's goal is explicit: to subdue all campus activism promoting the rights of Palestinians by threatening to harm the career prospects of the thousands of people it lists. It regularly writes to universities or employers to "alert" them to supposed antisemitism from these academics and students.

So effective has the campaign been that some have been forced to write "apologies", published on the website, to get themselves removed from the list.

### **Malicious complaint**

Karmi's treatment appears to be a disturbing hint that pro-Israel lobbyists hope to replicate the Canary Mission's success in the UK. At the end of its [statement](#) on Karmi, the CAA calls on students "concerned about antisemitism on campus" to contact it for help.

However, in this case, its threatened complaint to Exeter University may prove ineffective. A spokesman said the university's formal affiliation with Karmi ended some time ago.

The CAA's claims against Karmi are as hollow and malicious as those typically directed by pro-Israel lobbyists against academics in the US. Perhaps not surprisingly, they focus on the most controversial of the examples included in the IHRA definition: that it is antisemitic to refer to Israel as a "racist endeavour".

It is terrible enough that, based on the IHRA definition, a supposedly progressive political party such as Labour has proscribed all discussion of Israel's political character and Zionist ideology. But the idea that it ought to be off-limits for academics too is not only preposterous, but downright Orwellian. It is as intellectually fraudulent as it would have been to deny academia back in the 1980s the right to debate whether apartheid South Africa was a "racist endeavour".

It should be pointed out that even the IHRA definition - faulty as it is - never suggests that all references to Israel as a "racist endeavour" are proof of antisemitism. It notes that such comments may be antisemitic "taking into account the overall context".

But pro-Israel lobbyists are no more interested in the nuances of debate about Israel than they are in free speech. The goal here is to protect Israel from scrutiny at all costs.

### **'Terminating Zionism'**

In fact, Karmi simply points out the glaring incompatibility between Israel's declared, exclusive status as the state of the Jewish people - confirmed in its recent notorious [nation-state law](#) - and the rights of Palestinians to self-determination in their former homeland.

As she writes:

“In apartheid South Africa, it was not possible to support apartheid and also black rights, and the conflict only ended with apartheid’s abolition. The same holds true for Zionism in Palestine. Terminating Zionism is the only way to a permanent peace.”

The CAA not only twists the IHRA definition’s intent, but then further weaponises it by stating that Karmi’s suggestion Israel is a “racist endeavour” – and that the ideology underpinning it should be “terminated” – is the equivalent of arguing that Israel “should be destroyed”.

The meaning of words is always imprecise, but not that imprecise. Karmi is calling for the termination of a political ideology, not the destruction of a country or its people. What would be replaced is an ideology, Zionism, that has justified the dispossession and oppression of her people, Palestinians, for many decades.

One can argue whether such an argument is right or wrong, good or bad – but it is clearly not antisemitic.

### **Israeli embassy’s role**

There are similar flaws with the CAA’s other criticisms of Karmi. The organisation falsely makes two further claims: that, according to Karmi, the pro-Israel lobby in the UK was doing “Israel’s bidding” in undermining Corbyn; and that she attributes an “ulterior motive” to the lobby’s actions in describing its concerns about antisemitism as “smears”.

The CAA argues that she has thereby violated two other examples from the IHRA definition of antisemitism: “Making mendacious, dehumanising, demonising, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective” and “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.”

Karmi does not refer to lobbyists such as the CAA as doing “Israel’s bidding”. Far more reasonably, she argues that the pro-Israel lobby’s campaign against Corbyn was “likely coordinated by the Israeli embassy”. In fact, far from being antisemitic, this statement is not even open to dispute.

Israel [established](#) a Ministry of Strategic Affairs more than a decade ago whose remit – widely discussed in the Israeli media – was to crush all support for the call made by Palestinian civil society in 2005 to launch a boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign targeting Israel.

The ministry’s work assisting pro-Israel lobby groups abroad, including in the UK, was [exposed](#) in detail in an undercover, four-part documentary aired by Al Jazeera in early 2017.

Shai Masot, a member of the strategic affairs ministry working at the embassy in London, is shown repeatedly meeting with pro-Israel lobby groups to devise ways to [undermine](#) Corbyn. The only reason this coordination between the lobby and an Israeli government official is not widely known is because the UK establishment media, which also wanted Corbyn gone, barely bothered to report its stunning revelations of direct Israeli interference in UK politics.

To argue, as the CAA does, that Karmi's claim of coordination between the lobby and the Israeli embassy is evidence of antisemitism makes sense only if telling the truth is antisemitic.

### **The lobby's Israel prism**

Finally, the CAA again twists the IHRA's already problematic definition of antisemitism in claiming that Karmi suggests "the Jewish community has had an ulterior motive in pointing out anti-Jewish racism in Labour".

Karmi did not ascribe any motives – ulterior or otherwise – to the "Jewish community". She suggested that pro-Israel lobby groups sought to damage Corbyn because they perceived him to be a threat to Israel, a cause they explicitly champion. Only pro-Israel lobbyists, it seems, subscribe to the antisemitic notion that Jews are an indistinguishable, homogeneous bloc with a single view about Israel.

All lobbies weaponise political issues in ways that accord with their worldview. It is inherent in the idea of a lobby. That does not necessarily mean they always do so cynically; lobbies form because a group of people see the world chiefly through a prism they believe to be vitally – even existentially – important to themselves as individuals, or a group, or a nation, or a species. That applies equally to lobbies supportive of Israel, guns, the banking sector, the arms industry and the environment.

Karmi did not invent the idea that Israel is crucially important to pro-Israel lobbyists and has become an organising principle for the way they prioritise and express their political concerns. The lobbyists themselves did.

### **Defying evidence**

The CAA has not changed its spots since it was established six years ago to defend Israel from critics appalled by the massacre of civilians in Gaza. Then, it was clear to everyone, even a parliamentary inquiry into antisemitism, that the group was weaponising the charge of antisemitism to prevent scrutiny of Israel.

The difference now is that the "irresponsible" methods and definitions used by the CAA have become routine for the much wider Israel lobby.

As Israel's policies and actions on the ground against Palestinians have become ever more explicitly indefensible, the pro-Israel lobby has responded not by abandoning Israel but by digging in deeper, entrenching its support for Israel in defiance of all the real-world evidence.

That cognitive discomfort can only intensify so long as Palestinians and their supporters are able to tell of the cost and suffering caused by Israel's continuing existence as a Jewish state.

Which is why, now that Corbyn is out of the way, Karmi and other outspoken Palestinians will find themselves directly in the firing line – transformed into antisemites simply because they call for equality and peace between Israeli Jews and Palestinians.

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