

The Crisis in Corbyn's Labour Party Is Over Israel, Not Anti-Semitism

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*If there is indeed an anti-semitism problem in the UK's Labour party, it is not in the places where the British corporate media have been directing our attention. What can be said with even more certainty is that there is rampant hatred expressed towards Jews in the same British media that is currently decrying the supposed anti-semitism of Labour leader **Jeremy Corbyn**.*

Here is what I hope is a little wisdom, earned the hard way as a reporter in Israel over nearly two decades. I offer it in case it helps to resolve the confusion felt by some still pondering the endless reports of Labour's supposed anti-semitism "crisis".

Racism towards Palestinians

In the first year after my arrival in Israel in late 2001, during the most violent phase of Israel's suppression of the Palestinians' second intifada, I desperately tried to make sense of the events raging around me. Like most new reporters, I searched for experts - at that time, mostly leftwing Israeli analysts and academics. But the more I listened, the less I understood. I felt like a ball in a pinball machine, bounced from one hair-trigger to the next.

My problem was exacerbated by the fact that, unlike my colleagues, I had chosen to locate myself in Nazareth, the largest Palestinian city in Israel, rather than in a Jewish area or in the occupied territories. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians seemed much more complex when viewed through the prism of Palestinian "citizens" living inside a self-declared Jewish state.

The Israeli experts I contacted deplored the brutality of the occupation unequivocally and in ways it was difficult not to admire, given the morass of anti-Palestinian sentiment and self-righteousness into which the rest of Israeli society was rapidly sinking. But each time I latched on to such an Israeli in the hope of deepening my own understanding, something they said would knock me sideways.

As readily as they condemned the occupation, they would laud the self-evidently bogus liberal democratic credentials of a Jewish state, one that I could see from my location in Nazareth was structurally organised to deny equal rights to its Palestinian citizens. Or the experts would echo the Israeli government's inciteful claims that this largely quiescent Palestinian minority in Israel - a fifth of the population - was at best a demographic threat to

the Jewish majority, and at worst a Trojan horse secretly working to destroy the Jewish state from within.

The very racism towards Palestinians in the occupied territories these experts eschewed, they readily flaunted when discussing Palestinians inside Israel. Were they really leftists or covert ethnic chauvinists?

Appearances can be deceptive

It was many months before I could make sense of this puzzle. An answer was only possible when I factored in the Israeli state's official ideology: Zionism.

Israeli leftists who were also avowed Zionists – the vast majority of them – saw the conflict exclusively through the colonial prism of their own ethnic privilege. They didn't much care for Palestinians or their rights. Their opposition to the occupation was barely related to the tangible harm it did to the Palestinian population.

Rather, they wanted an end to the occupation because they believed it brutalised and corrupted Israeli Jewish society, seeping into its pores like a toxin. Or they wanted the occupation to end because the combined populations of Palestinians in "Greater Israel" – in the occupied territories and inside Israel – would soon outnumber Jews, leading, they feared, to comparisons with apartheid South Africa. They wanted Israel out of all or most of the occupied territories, cutting off these areas like a gangrenous limb threatening the rest of the body's health.

Only later, when I started to meet anti-Zionist Jews, did I find an opposition to the occupation rooted in a respect for the rights and dignity of the Palestinians in the territories. And because their position was an ethical, rights-based one, rather than motivated by opportunism and self-interest, these anti-Zionist Jews also cared about ending discrimination against the one in five Israeli citizens who were Palestinian. Unlike my experts, they were morally consistent.

I raise this, because the lesson I eventually learnt was this: you should never assume that, because someone has adopted a moral position you share, their view is based on the moral principles that led you to adopt that position. The motives of those you stand alongside can be very different from your own. People can express a morally sound view for morally dubious, or even outright immoral, reasons. If you ally yourself with such people, you will invariably be disappointed or betrayed.

There was another, more particular lesson. Ostensible support for Palestinians may in fact be cover for other ways of oppressing them.

And so it has been with most of those warning of an anti-semitism "crisis" in Labour. Anti-semitism, like all racisms, is to be denounced. But not all denunciations of it are what they seem. And not all professions of support for Palestinians should be taken at face value.

The vilification of Corbyn



Most reasonable observers, especially if they are not Jewish, instinctively recoil from criticising a Jew who is highlighting anti-semitism. It is that insulation from criticism, that protective shield, that encouraged Labour MP **Margaret Hodge** (image on the right) recently to publicly launch a [verbal assault](#) on Corbyn, vilifying him, against all evidence, as an “anti-semite and racist”.

It was that same protective shield that led to Labour officials [dropping an investigation](#) of Hodge, even though it is surely beyond doubt that her actions brought the party “into disrepute” - in this case, in a flagrant manner hard to imagine being equalled. This is the same party, remember, that recently [expelled Marc Wadsworth](#), a prominent black anti-racism activist, on precisely those grounds after he accused Jewish Labour MP **Ruth Smeeth** of colluding with rightwing newspapers to undermine Corbyn.

The Labour party is so hamstrung by fears about anti-semitism, it seems, that it decided that an activist (Wadsworth) denigrating a Labour MP (Smeeth) was more damaging to the party’s reputation than a Labour MP (Hodge) vilifying the party’s leader (Corbyn). In this twisted set of priorities, a suspicion of possible racism towards a Jewish MP served to justify actual racism against a black party activist.

But the perversion of Labour party values goes much further. Recent events have proven that party officials have decisively prioritised the rights of diehard supporters of Israel among British Jewry to defend Israel at all costs over the right of others, including Jews, to speak out about the continuing brutalisation of Palestinians by Israel’s occupation regime.

Hodge and the other Labour MPs trumpeting anti-semitism might be entitled to the benefit of the doubt - that they truly fear anti-semitism is on the rise in the Labour party - had they not repeatedly indulged in the kind of anti-semitism they themselves have deplored. What do I mean?

When they speak of an anti-semitism “crisis” in the party, these Labour MPs - and the fervently pro-Israel lobby groups behind them like the Jewish Labour Movement - intentionally gloss over the fact that many of the prominent activists who have been investigated, suspended or expelled for anti-semitism in recent months - fuelling the claim of a “crisis” - are in fact Jewish.

Why are the “Jewish” sensitivities of **Margaret Hodge, Ruth Smeeth** or **Louise Ellman** more important than those of **Moshe Machover, Tony Greenstein, Cyril Chilson, Jackie Walker** or **Glyn Secker** - all Labour activists who have found their sensitivities, as Jews opposing the abuse of Palestinians, count for little or nothing among Labour officials? Why must we tiptoe around Hodge because she is Jewish, ignoring her bullygirl tactics to promote her political agenda in defence of Israel, but crack down on Greenstein and Chilson, even though they are Jewish, to silence their voices in defence of the rights of Palestinians?

‘Wrong kind of Jews’

The problem runs deeper still. Labour MPs like Hodge, Smeeth, Ellman and John Mann have stoked the anti-semitic predilections of the British media, which has been only too ready to indict “bad Jews” while extolling “good Jews”.

That was only too evident earlier this year when Corbyn tried to put out the fire that such Labour MPs had intentionally fuelled. He joined Jewdas, a satirical leftwing Jewish group that is critical of Israel, for a Passover meal. He was roundly condemned for the move.



Source: Archbishop Cranmer

Jewdas were [declared](#) by rightwing Jewish establishment organisations like the Board of Deputies and by the British corporate media as the “wrong kind of Jews”, or even as not “real” Jews. In the view of the Board and the media, Corbyn was [tainted](#) by his association with them.

How are Jewdas the “wrong kind of Jews”? Because they do not reflexively kneel before Israel. Ignore Corbyn for a moment. Did Labour MPs Hodge, Ellman or Smeeth speak out in the defence of fellow Jews under attack over their Jewishness? No, they did not.

If Greenstein and Chilson are being excommunicated as (Jewish) “anti-semites” for their full-throated condemnations of Israel’s institutional racism, why are Hodge and Ellman not equally anti-semites for their collusion in the vilification of supposedly “bad” or “phoney” Jews like Jewdas, Greenstein and Chilson.

It should be clear that this anti-semitism “crisis” is not chiefly about respecting Jewish sensitivities or even about Jewish identity. It is about protecting the sensitivities of some Jews on Israel, a state oppressing and dispossessing the Palestinian people.

Policing debates on Israel

When the Guardian’s senior columnist **Jonathan Freedland** [insists](#) that his Jewish identity is intimately tied to Israel, and that to attack Israel is to attack him personally, he is demanding the exclusive right to police the parameters of discussions about Israel. He is asserting his right, over the rights of other Jews – and, of course, Palestinians – to determine what the boundaries of political discourse on Israel are, and where the red lines denoting anti-semitism are drawn.

This is why Labour MPs like Hodge and journalists like Freedland are at the centre of another confected anti-semitism row in the Labour party: over the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-semitism and an associated set of examples. They [want](#) *all* the IHRA’s examples adopted by Labour, not just most of them.

There are very clear, existing definitions of anti-semitism. They are variations of the simple formulation: “Anti-semitism is the hatred of Jews for being Jews.” But the IHRA takes this clear definition and muddies it to the point that all sorts of political debates can be viewed as potentially anti-semitic, as leading jurists have warned (see here and here).

That is only undercored by the fact that a majority of the IHRA’s examples of anti-semitism relate to Israel – a nuclear-armed state now constitutionally designed to privilege Jews over non-Jews inside its recognised borders and engaged in a half-century of brutal military

occupation of the Palestinian people outside its borders.

To be fair to the drafters of the IHRA guidelines, these examples were supposed only to be treated as *potentially* anti-semitic, depending on the context. That is the express view of the definition's drafter, Kenneth Stern, a Jewish lawyer, who has warned that the guidelines are being [perverted](#) to silence criticism of Israel and stifle free speech.

And who are leading precisely the moves that Stern has warned against? People like Jonathan Freedland and Margaret Hodge, cheered on by large swaths of Labour MPs, who have strongly implied that Corbyn and his allies in the party are anti-semitic for sharing Stern's concerns.

Hodge and Freedland are desperate to strong-arm the Labour party into setting the IHRA guidelines in stone, as the unchallengeable, definitive new definition of anti-semitism. That will relieve them of the arduous task of policing those discourse boundaries on the basis of evidence and of context. They will have a ready-made, one-size-fits-all definition to foreclose almost all serious debate about Israel.

Want to suggest that Israel's new Nation-State Law, giving Jewish citizens constitutionally guaranteed rights denied to non-Jewish citizens, is proof of the institutional racism on which political Zionism is premised and that was enshrined in the founding principles of the state of Israel? Well, you just violated one of the IHRA guidelines by arguing that Israel is a "racist endeavour". If Freedland and Hodge get their way, you would be certain to be declared an anti-semiter and expelled from the Labour party.

Grovelling apology

Revealing how cynical this manoeuvring by Hodge, Freedland and others is, one only has to inspect the faux-outrage over the latest "anti-semitism crisis" involving Corbyn. He has been forced to make a [grovelling apology](#) - one that deeply discredits him - for hosting an anti-racism conference in 2010 at which a speaker made a comparison between Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the Nazis' treatment of Jews. That violated another of the IHRA examples.

But again, what none of these anti-semitism warriors has wanted to highlight is that the speaker given a platform at the conference was the late [Hajo Meyer](#), a Jewish Holocaust survivor who dedicated his later years to supporting Palestinian rights. Who, if not Meyer, deserved the right to make such a comparison? And to imply that he was an anti-semiter because he prioritised Palestinian rights over the preservation of Israel's privileges for Jews is truly contemptible.

In fact, it is more than that. It is far closer to anti-semitism than the behaviour of Jewish critics of Israel like Greenstein and Chilson, who have been expelled from the Labour party. To intentionally exploit and vilify a Holocaust survivor for cheap, short-term political advantage - in an attempt to damage Corbyn - is malevolence of the worst kind.

Having stoked fears of an anti-semitism crisis, Hodge, Freedland and others have actively sought to obscure the wider context in which it must be judged - as, in large part, a painful debate raging inside the Jewish community. It is a debate between fervently pro-Israel Jewish establishment groups and a growing body of marginalised anti-Zionist Jewish activists who wish to show solidarity with the Palestinians. Labour is not suffering from an "anti-

semitism crisis”; it is mired in an “Israel crisis”.

‘Repulsive’ campaign



In their silence about the abuses of Meyer, Jewdas, Greenstein, Chilson and many others, Freedland and Hodge have shown that they do not really care about the safety or sensitivities of Jews. What they chiefly care about is protecting their chosen cause of Israel, and crippling the chances of a committed supporter of Palestinian rights from ever reaching power. They are prepared to sacrifice other Jews, even victims of the Holocaust, as well as the Labour party itself, for that kind of political gain.

Hodge and Freedland are behaving as though they are decent Jews, the only ones who have the right to a voice and to sensitivities. They are wrong.

They are like the experts I first met in Israel who concealed their racism towards Palestinians by flaunting their self-serving anti-occupation credentials. Under the cover of concerns about anti-semitism, Freedland and Hodge have helped stoke hatred – either explicitly or through their silence – towards the “wrong kind of Jews”, towards Jews whose critical views of Israel they fear.

It does not have to be this way. Rather than foreclose it, they could allow a debate to flourish within Britain’s Jewish community and within the Labour party. They could admit that not only is there no evidence that Corbyn is racist, but that he has clearly been committed to fighting racism all his life.

Don’t want to take my word for it? You don’t have to. Listen instead to Stephen Oryszczuk, foreign editor of the Corbyn-hating Jewish News. His newspaper was one of three Jewish weeklies that recently [published](#) the same front-page editorial claiming that Corbyn was an “existential threat” to British Jews.

Oryszczuk, even if no friend to the Labour leader, deplored the behaviour of his own newspaper. In an [interview](#), he observed of this campaign to vilify Corbyn: “It’s repulsive. This is a dedicated anti-racist we’re trashing. I just don’t buy into it at all.” He added of Corbyn: “I don’t believe he’s antisemitic, nor do most reasonable people. He’s anti-Israel and that’s not the same.”

Oryszczuk conceded that some people were weaponising anti-semitism and that these individuals were “certainly out to get him [Corbyn]”. Unlike Freedland and Hodge, he was also prepared to admit that some voices in the Jewish community were being actively silenced: “It’s partly our fault, in the mainstream Jewish media. We could – and arguably

should – have done a better job at giving a voice to Jews who think differently, for which I personally feel a little ashamed. ... On Israel today, what you hear publicly tends to be very uniform.”

And that is exactly how Hodge and Freedland would like to keep it – in the Labour party, in the Jewish community, and in wider British society.

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