

UK and Israel: Has the Fightback Against Weaponised Antisemitism Begun?

Jewish groups and academics are finally exposing the UK establishment's smear campaign to silence criticism of Israel and destroy the left

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There has been a wave of highly damaging but unsubstantiated allegations of [antisemitism](#) against students and academics, according to a new [survey of British universities](#).

In 38 of 40 cases brought against lecturers, students, student unions and societies in the five years to 2022, no evidence was found to support the accusations of antisemitism. Hearings in the other two cases have yet to conclude.

Hidden in the raw figures is the enormous toll such false allegations take on the accused: personal suffering and reputational and career damage, as well as the additional chilling effect on academic freedom in the wider university community.

That is unlikely to be an unfortunate side product of these allegations. It seems to be precisely their point.

Brismes, a group representing [British](#) academics studying the Middle East, published the survey findings in a report this month that suggests wrongful or malicious claims of antisemitism are likely to increase in number.

The spate of allegations was unleashed after universities began adopting a revised, and highly controversial, [definition of antisemitism](#) issued by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016.

Three-quarters of universities have now rubber-stamped the definition after Gavin Williamson, as education secretary, threatened in 2020 to [cut the funding](#) of any that refused to do so.

A majority of the IHRA's 11 [illustrative examples](#) – some of which, as the report notes, contradict the main definition – shift the focus away from the traditional meaning of Jew-hatred to emphasise criticism of [Israel](#).

As many warned, that has handed Israel's most staunch supporters [a dragnet](#) they can use to smear anyone expressing solidarity with [Palestinians](#) against Israeli oppression, while [intimidating onlookers](#) into a complicit silence.

In truth, that was always the aim. The IHRA definition grew out of covert efforts [by the Israeli government](#) to blur traditional distinctions between antisemitism and anti-Zionism to shield itself from critics, including human rights groups, who were highlighting Israel's apartheid rule over Palestinians.

Critics Silenced

Promotion of the IHRA definition has risked violating Britain's legal obligations to protect free speech. The UK government is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, and paradoxically it passed the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act back in May.

The act is [ostensibly designed to](#) “ensure students are able to speak freely in and out of the classroom, while offering more protection for academics who teach material that may offend some students”.

This may explain why the government's taskforce on antisemitism was keen to [publicise feedback](#) from universities that, it says, shows adoption of the IHRA definition has had no impact on academic freedom.

The evidence compiled by Brismes, backed by research from the European Legal Support Centre, appears to blow that claim apart. Weaponised antisemitism is creating a climate on campuses that increasingly makes discussion of Israeli crimes off-limits.

But the lessons to be learnt from the growing weaponisation of antisemitism in academia aren't limited to universities. As Middle East Eye has regularly documented, similar smear tactics, invariably based on the IHRA definition, have been used for years to silence [political activists](#), [human rights groups](#), [cultural icons](#) and [Palestinians](#).

The British establishment's aim has been to use the IHRA definition to scrub political and social discourse of all but the mildest criticism of Israel.

That is the context making it possible for the UK to step up [trade links with Israel](#) and pass legislation to give Israel special protections, at a time when a consensus has been reached by the international human rights community that Israel is [an apartheid state](#), and after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu included [self-declared fascist politicians](#) last year in his new government.

With barely a murmur from the opposition Labour party, the UK government's [Economic Activity of Public Bodies Bill](#) will deny public bodies such as local authorities [the right to support](#) boycott, sanctions and divestment campaigns against Israel over its oppression of Palestinians.

The Orwellian truth of official policy is this: the more Israel's crimes are made public, the less we are allowed to speak about them or do anything.

Legal Complaint

The Brismes report is the belated sign of a fightback. As is the decision by Jewish political activists this month to alert the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to the Labour party's discriminatory treatment of Jewish members under Keir Starmer's leadership.

Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL), representing left-wing Jews in the party, sent a [formal complaint to Labour](#), prepared by the law firm Bindmans, accusing it of "discriminating unlawfully against its Jewish members and unlawfully harassing them".

The letter, copied to the equalities watchdog, argues that Jews are being singled out for punishment, invariably based on the IHRA definition, over their vocal criticisms of Israel. It suggests legal action may follow if the group's concerns are not addressed.

JVL notes that Labour's Jewish members feel a special moral responsibility to speak out about Israeli brutality towards Palestinians because that oppression is carried out by Israel in the name of all Jews.

Nonetheless, [Labour statistics show](#) that Jewish party members are six times more likely than non-Jews to be investigated over antisemitism, and nearly 10 times more likely to be expelled from the party.

The letter adds that harassment of left-wing Jewish members by Labour head office includes a "harsh disciplinary regime" that subjects them to investigation as well as an unwillingness to take their own complaints seriously. Eleven of the JVL's 12 Jewish executive committee members have been investigated.

Last year John McDonnell, a former shadow chancellor, [himself wrote](#) to the party warning that "disrespectful" treatment of JVL members amounted to discrimination.

Jenny Manson, one of JVL's founders, told MEE that Jewish members were often required to receive antisemitism training after being disciplined for alleged antisemitic conduct if they wished to remain in the party.

"It's a cruel, even brutal, trick to brand these Jewish members as antisemites when they have experience and in-depth understanding of real antisemitism," she said.

Labour, she added, not only appeared to tolerate their characterisation as ["the wrong sort of Jews"](#) but often implicitly endorsed this racist labelling by refusing to deal with their harassment.

Findings Buried

The JVL's notification to the equalities watchdog of the abusive treatment of Jewish party members is likely to embarrass Starmer. It has echoes of claims made against his predecessor, **Jeremy Corbyn**.

In Corbyn's case, unlike Starmer's, there was no evidence beyond media-fuelled

insinuations that Labour discriminated against Jews or indulged antisemitism.

Nonetheless, in 2018, two pro-Israel groups referred Labour to the EHRC, claiming that antisemitism [was rife under Corbyn](#). The watchdog carried out an investigation – the first into a major political party – that reported two years later.

Even relying on the IHRA definition, the Equalities Commission could identify only two instances of what it characterised as “[antisemitic harassment](#)”, in each instance by an individual rather than party structures.

In fact, its main conclusion – buried in [both the report](#) and the media coverage – was that, when Corbyn’s officials discriminated by interfering in antisemitism disciplinary cases, it was usually in favour of complainants. In other words, Labour under Corbyn was unfairly ruling incidents as antisemitic when the evidence was lacking.

The over-eagerness of Corbyn’s team to suspend or expel members for antisemitism on flimsy evidence was hardly surprising, given that the entire British media were portraying Labour under his leadership as a nest of antisemites.

An independent investigation by Martin Forde KC, ordered by Starmer, found last year that the issue of antisemitism had been [weaponised for factional purposes](#), chiefly to damage Corbyn and his left-wing supporters and strengthen the Labour right.

Forde’s inquiry confirmed many of the revelations contained in a leaked internal report that showed the right-wing Labour bureaucracy [plotting against Corbyn](#), dragging its feet on disciplinary cases to embarrass him, and actively trying to sabotage his 2017 election campaign.

Starmer has done his best to [bury the Forde report](#) since its publication last year. He is also preparing to risk up to [£4m \(\\$4.9m\) in legal bills](#) to pursue former Corbyn staff members he accuses of leaking the report.

Labour did not respond to a request from Middle East Eye for comment.

Rigged Politics

Paradoxically, discrimination against Jews by Labour is now quantifiable under Starmer’s leadership: Jewish members critical of Israel have been disproportionately targeted.

Such an outcome was something Corbyn’s team [explicitly warned against](#) while he was leader, even as he came under severe pressure from the media and pro-Israel lobby groups.

Despite the thinness of the evidence against Corbyn, the EHRC imposed on Labour an “[action plan](#)”, effectively monitoring it “to prevent continuation or reoccurrence” of unlawful acts relating to antisemitism. The action plan, it added, “was legally enforceable by the court if not fulfilled”.

Jewish Voice for Labour, it appears, is calling the EHRC’s bluff. The equalities body was all too ready to investigate Labour when Corbyn was leader, even on weak evidence of antisemitism and harassment of Jews.

Will it subject Starmer to similar scrutiny, especially when evidence of harassment against

Jewish party members seems overwhelming and the equalities watchdog's action plan is being so flagrantly flouted?

Don't hold your breath. The [EHRC released Labour](#) from special measures back in January.

An EHRC spokesperson told Middle East Eye the commission was "satisfied [Labour] had implemented the necessary actions to improve their complaints, recruitment, training and other procedures to the legal standards required".

As [Corbyn warned in response](#) to the publication of the commission's report in 2020, the scale of antisemitism in Labour under his leadership was "dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents inside and outside the party". Those opponents have won.

The lack of concern about Jews being so openly discriminated against by one of Britain's two largest parties will, however, demonstrate how right Corbyn was.

The furore was never about antisemitism or the welfare of Jews. For some, it was about silencing criticism of Israel, while for others it was about preventing a moderate socialist from getting anywhere near No 10 Downing Street.

Starmer, who has put patriotism, Nato and big business at the [top of his programme](#), has nothing to fear. No one in power cares about how much his party harasses Jews, when those Jews are on the left.

Weaponised antisemitism is still serving its purpose: it has crushed the left politically, using Israel as the cudgel, and is now busy stifling discussions on campuses that might have exposed how bogus and politicised the campaign against the left really was.

That is why the fightback matters. It is not just about setting the record straight. It is about exposing how rigged British politics truly is.

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