



Time to Unmask the Imposture of anti-Zionism

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In this scholarly analysis, Eva Illouz, Directrice d'Études at France's École des hautes études en sciences sociales, probes the attempts of the anti-Zionist left to separate its ideas and attitudes from charges of antisemitism. Illouz explores the persistence of racisms in modern societies and asks why, when the left generally upholds the principle of empowering minority groups with the right to determine what constitutes abuse of or discrimination against its members, it singularly refuses to do so in the case of antisemitism. Illouz also confronts the nature of anti-Zionism itself, asking why 'a secular ideology whose aim was to restore dignity and independence to the Jews has been singled out as the bearer of a radical guilt and evil as no other.'

When left implicit, the assumptions with which each side of a controversy raises its arguments block the passageways of thinking and obfuscate judgment. Let me then spell out my own assumptions when addressing a question that has been at the centre of many debates since 7 October (and before): Is anti-Zionism a form of antisemitism?

Preliminary Assumptions

My first assumption is that ethnic or racial hatreds rest on binary distinctions and hierarchies – Christians-Jews; civilisation-primitives; whites-blacks. These binaries are deeply entrenched in language, stories, and images and do not disappear in societies as seemingly egalitarian as ours. In fact, they flourish in them. For example, antisemitism has made a forceful come back, especially since 7 October. Thus, one can use racist, sexist, antisemitic tropes without conscious intent to demean the said groups.

My second assumption is that, however hard we fight against the essentialisation and hatred these categories entail, they do not die easily: they continue to linger and 'stick around,' albeit in round-about and convoluted ways. When Jim Crow laws were repealed, blacks became associated with crime; when feminism changed legislation, it brought with it the stereotype of the demonic ambitious woman. Hierarchical binaries have a long life because their cognitive and emotional templates periodically reincarnate in new forms. Anti-Zionism may well be an example of such a new form.

The third assumption is that these hierarchies are so deeply inscribed in our modes of perception that it requires much more than self-conscious awareness to be rid of them. The cultural unconscious does not spare anyone, including members of discriminated groups. Some women can be sexist, some Jews antisemitic, and some anti-colonialists racist. If that is the case, the argument 'I cannot be sexist/racist/antisemitic because I am a woman/a black person/a Jew' is non-receivable. No one can be *a priori* exempt of sexism or antisemitism on the basis of their gender or ethnicity. That many anti-Zionists are Jews, does not in principle constitute a proof that anti-Zionist ideology does not peddle in and recycle antisemitic views.

I lay out these assumptions to better address one of the most vexing issues in the political arena: Is anti-Zionism a circumvoluted form of antisemitism?

Believing Minority Groups

The self-defined progressive left – such as Judith Butler, Pankaj Mishra, Masha Gessen (whose recent *New York Times* essay [‘Drawing the Line on Antisemitism’](#) generated a storm) and others – has spent a great deal of energy trying to distinguish between anti-Zionism as a political ideology and antisemitism as a heinous and irrational sentiment. They have done this for two seemingly good, if obvious reasons: the first is that we must be able to condemn Israeli policies, when they deserve our indignation, without incurring the nauseating suspicion of being antisemitic. The second is that some members of the Jewish and Israeli establishments (Netanyahu chief among them) have sometimes cynically used the allegation of antisemitism to silence accusations that Israel acts in breach of international law, commits war crimes, and does not intend to end an immoral Occupation. But I do not think this is the only thing at stake in the relentless insistence that anti-Zionism and antisemitism must be kept separate.

Since 7 October, many liberal and left leaning Zionist Jews have become increasingly uncomfortable about the uses of anti-Zionism. Why is the movement of emancipation of the Jews the only one to be contested and vilified 120 years after its birth? Why is Israel the only state in the world whose existence is up for question, even a matter for debate at dinner tables? Why is the spurning rejection of Zionism so central to progressive political identity? In a world rife with persecutions, wars, genocides, massacres, civil wars, the obsession with which Israel’s crimes are singled out for opprobrium cannot fail to raise the suspicion that more is at stake than Israel’s own sins. To address this suspicion, we need a method which should address two questions: Does anti-Zionism discriminate against Jews (that is, treat them differently from other groups) and does it dehumanise them?

In trying to arbitrate whether a word, behaviour, or idea is discriminatory, sexist, racist or Islamophobic, the progressive Left has, by and large, deferred to members of minority groups. This is the only logical way to proceed, for, if discrimination or racial hatred profits one group to the detriment of another, we cannot let the profiting group judge how harmful its own behaviour is. Whether men ‘only’ pay a compliment or harass women in the workplace when they comment on their appearance can be decided only by the latter, not the former. This assumption has become universally accepted, except in one case: the Jews.

Many Jews insist that the language and animus of anti-Zionism are often antisemitic, yet these claims have been and continue to be mysteriously dismissed by the same left which has let all other minority groups define offences to their dignity. For example, in many western democracies, Muslims have successfully claimed that discussions such as those on the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in western societies or the patriarchal oppression of women through the veil, are Islamophobic and western-centric. We are thus entitled to ask why the equivalent has not been true for Jews. Why has the Left remained tone-deaf to Jews’ pleas that anti-Zionism is, if not equivalent to antisemitism, disturbingly close to it?

Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, Jews are the only minority that is overtly and systematically suspected of manipulating their victimisation (‘the Shoah’ or ‘antisemitism’) to score political and symbolic goals. I have never heard the same accusation proffered about other ethnic or racial groups, at least in the liberal camp. We would all shudder at the claim that descendants of slavery exploit their history and victimisation to gain political privileges. Yet, this is exactly what progressives routinely affirm about Jews and antisemitism, often mocking and deriding Jews’ fear and grief.

Why then is there such jarring asymmetry between Jewish and non-Jewish voices in their capacity to use their historical memory and be able to designate what constitutes an offence to their group? Assuming progressives are not animated by an explicit and conscious hatred of Jews, I believe there is only one plausible answer: Even though Muslims (to continue with the same example) are demographically, territorially, and economically (in total accumulated wealth) far superior to the

Jews, they are viewed as a vulnerable and persecuted minority, while Jews – especially when associated with Israel – are denied this status. If Muslims constitute two billion people in the world, or close to 30 per cent of world population, and the Jews barely 15 millions, or 0.2 per cent of the people who inhabit this planet, the latter clearly better qualify to the status of vulnerable minority in global terms. But in western democracies, Jews are treated as a dominant (and 'white') group, a perception buttressed by the fact they are mentally associated to Israel, a military state victorious in numerous wars. Survey after survey, in Europe and in the USA, it was found that a third or more of the population believed Jews have too much power.^[1] More interestingly, young people, more likely to be progressive than older people, are also more likely to think Jews control too much of the economy and the media.

This asymmetry between the leftist treatment of Muslims and Jews betrays a double form of discrimination: It views Islam as in need of protection, despite its territorial reach and religious power, revealing an Orientalist condescension (protecting Islam differs from protecting from real and present discrimination the Muslim minorities who live in Western countries). And it cancels the minority status of Jews, because they are implicitly associated with power and domination.

More than that: when forced to legitimise the existence of Israel, Jews usually invoke the argument of persistent antisemitism, and this argument, in the progressive moral grammar, *ipso facto* cancels itself. It is discounted and recoded as an 'instrumentalisation' or 'weaponisation' (to use the fashionable word) of a tragic history to Jew-wash Israel's crimes. The fear or denunciation of antisemitism by Jews is tautologically transformed into a 'proof' or sign of cunning manipulateness, thereby automatically disqualifying it. Note that the wily manoeuvres of Iran and other Muslim countries to discard and disqualify any critique of political Islam as Islamophobic has never met with a similar *a priori* suspicion by the progressive Left.

Contemporary anti-Zionism

Thus we may say, rather confidently, that two key tropes of traditional antisemitism 'happen' to be the same as the ones bestowed on Zionists and Zionism: tentacular destructive power and malevolent scheming to evade accountability. These two key antisemitic motifs have been cut from antisemitism and pasted onto Zionism.

Let me quote [a document](#) published by the Dyke March in New York 2025. The document offers a long enumeration of the worthwhile causes Dykes endorse:

For Bodily Autonomy and Reproductive Justice; For the liberation of all oppressed people; Pro Immigrant; Body Neutral and Fat Positive ; Inclusive of all religions and spiritual practices; Supportive of Sex Workers; Sex and Kink Positive; Intergenerational; For self-exploration; Non-Hierarchical; A place for community and queer joy; Inclusive.

In this long list of causes to defend, only one makes it on the hit list of evil: Zionism. Judge for yourself:

Anti-Zionist: We oppose the nationalist political ideology of Zionism, particularly as it is promoted within U.S. institutions, which continues to be used to subjugate, displace, and marginalize Palestinian people. Anti-Zionism rejects the imperialist notion that the self-determination of one people can be used to justify institutional inequality, the forced displacement of a local population, or the ethnic cleansing and genocide of another ethnic and cultural group. We firmly distinguish between opposition to Zionism as a political ideology and antisemitism. We stand against antisemitism in all its forms and recognize that Jewish people have faced historical and ongoing oppression. Our critique is directed at a political system and ideology, not at Jewish people or Judaism.

Note that the perfunctory distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism is repeated here in order to pre-empt accusations of antisemitism and to silence the Jews who could feel demeaned or offended by the fact that in the long list of afflictions which damn and doom the world, only Israel and Zionism are worthy of mention. Not climate change, not nuclear warfare, not the brutal oppression of women in Afghanistan, not the Russian war on Ukraine, not world hunger and preventable fatal diseases, not the millions of displaced and murdered people in the Republic of Congo. Only Israel and Zionism. This should stupefy us.

Even more interesting in the document, is the conflation and equivalence between Zionism and Israeli policies. In fact, it is not Zionism which endorses Israeli policies but anti-Zionism which conflates Israel and its policies, transforming Zionism into a malevolent historical logic, an evil essence. To the best of my knowledge, no national movement representing a people has been turned into a generative principle of evil. For example, the partition of India as well the creation of several states in eastern Europe resulted in millions being forced to leave their homes – such nationalisms have not been turned into demonic ideologies, nor the resultant states demonic entities. Communist nations as Cambodia or China, responsible for an unfathomable amount of barbaric deaths, have not been essentialised and demonised by the liberal left as Zionism and Israel have been in such slogans as ‘Zionism is Racism’ or in the accusation of ‘genocide’ which started circulating three short days after 7 October (see for example Riyadh Mansour, Palestinian UN envoy).

Bob Vylan, an English punk singer, summarised crisply how Israelis are viewed in his on-stage chant: ‘Death, Death, to the IDF.’ Israel is the only nation whose citizens are boycotted (the tradition is old: ‘ghettos’ were early forms of boycotts) and whose death is publicly called for and applauded by a delighted audience. This is because Zionism constitutes a mark of infamy, and anti-Zionism has become, in the words of Marxist scholar Steve Cohen, transcendental, a principled opposition to Israel regardless of its policies and actions.

Given that Zionism restored to Jews their sense of pride and made them able to walk with their head high, making Zionism a crime is, for Jews, roughly equivalent to making gay pride or black dignity into sources of shame. This is perhaps the reason why progressives call for a distinction between Zionists and Jews, between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Aware that anti-Zionism vilifies a source of Jewish pride, they attempt to evade and obfuscate the obvious: separating Zionism from Jewishness is like wanting to eat the wheat without the chaff. Zionism and Jewishness are so intricately connected that only a healthy dose of bad faith and self-delusion can pretend otherwise.

Yet the progressive Left has deployed immense energy to try and convince us that the anti-Zionist Bundists of yore who believed that the Jews would overcome antisemitism through cultural autonomy in Europe, are the same as those who chant death songs to Israel (many of the Bundists were murdered by Hitler or Stalin, dealing a conclusive blow, both literal and figurative, to their integrationist philosophy.) The attempt to draw a wedge between anti-Zionism and antisemitism on the one hand, and to view contemporary anti-Zionists who call for the dismantlement of Israel as benign Bundists on the other, has created tremendous (and intentional) confusion with four tangible effects.

First, it makes it difficult for Jews to establish the boundaries and even the reality of offences against them, as has been the case with other minority groups. Jews can no longer establish the conditions for their dignity.

Second, the distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism renders Jews acceptable only if they abjure Zionism, much like Christians had demanded Jews renounce their faith and self-definition to be spared.

Third, by suspecting all denunciation of antisemitism to be a manoeuvre to serve Israel's interests, the progressive left produces a closed-circuit: it sets up the tautological conditions for exempting itself a priori from any accusation of ethnic, racial and religious hatred against the Jews, while at the same time reproducing the antisemitic trope of Jews as scheming, manipulative, and destructive agents.

Finally, the distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism widens the conceptual space for antisemitism: the wedge it seemingly drives between a political opinion and illegitimate hatred obfuscates the continuity between them and insufflates new life to antisemitism. Making new conceptual space for antisemitism is exactly what Gessen's article managed to achieve.[ii] According to Gessen, the shooting of two Israeli Embassy staff members outside of the Capital Jewish Museum, on 21 May and the firebombing of a pro-Israeli rally in Boulder were not antisemitic, but 'inextricably' connected to Gaza, that is, not motivated by hatred but by political opinion. At stake in Gessen's thesis is the transmutation of ethnic hatred into a respectable political opinion.

Conclusion

We must put to rest once and for all the double canard that Zionism is equivalent to support for Israeli policies and that anti-Zionism and antisemitism are radically different – one legitimate, one heinous. In fact, while they are not equivalent, they definitely bear a 'family resemblance.' Antisemitism provides anti-Zionism some of the key words of its lexicon and the key principles of its moral grammar. Antisemitism is the tracks on which the fast train of anti-Zionism can comfortably travel. Most of today's organised anti-Zionism is not geared around a political idea. It is not even an ideology. It is a form of hatred.

A large number of Jews, myself included, have no difficulties whatsoever in being Zionist and condemning in the strongest possible terms the inhumanity of the war that has been waged in Gaza and the immorality of the Occupation.[2] We have no difficulty identifying Netanyahu's cynicism and toxicity, and yet we never question the existence of Israel. Netanyahu does not invalidate Israel's existence, as Putin does not invalidate Russia's. Jews do not 'weaponise' antisemitism to achieve their goals more than Muslims 'weaponise' Islamophobia to score points and gain strategic advantages in the political field. Turning such weaponisation into a denial of antisemitism and a call for liquidating Israel is, however, both prejudice and hatred.

There is no logical connection between condemning Israel's immoral actions or Netanyahu's cynicism, on the one hand, and anti-Zionism on the other. To be a Zionist means to not even think about the question whether Israel, a very flawed and imperfect state as most states are, is legitimate, in the same way that one does not wonder about the legitimacy of Portugal, Pakistan, or Brazil (and progressives do not question the *validity* of repeat international norm-violators like Russia and China). But for anti-Zionism, this is a valid question, the only state of Jews is the only one, among all states, that should be 'dismantled' – physically or symbolically and the only state whose citizens should be excluded from the conduct of human affairs, that is, boycotted. Anti-Zionism makes the hatred of Israelis a mark of virtue.

The claim that anti-Zionism is entirely distinct from antisemitism is cognitively implausible and morally fraudulent. Imagine for a minute an entire intellectual movement supporting the dismantlement of African nations, shunning them and turning them into pariahs, obsessively vilifying them under the pretext of their endless wars while swearing to the skies that such position is not racist... It is doubtful many would be fooled. Yet this is exactly what anti-Zionism has done. It has been successful at doing this because Zionists are Jews and because there is a long tradition of excluding Jews and demonising them. It denies to Jews a key and essential dimension of their existence and self-definition; it demands that Jews abjure a deep component of themselves and

their identity. More: As the reactions to 7 October have shown, and as Gessen's article makes painfully clear, the stakes of anti-Zionism are, possibly, to make the killing of Jews if not legitimate, at least less unacceptable.

There is a semantic continuity between the ways in which Jews were vilified in a Christian world which associated them with deicide, the spilling of Gentile blood – especially children, and ritual murder, and the view of Israel as uniquely destructive and criminal. A secular ideology whose aim was to restore dignity and independence to the Jews has been singled out as the bearer of a radical guilt and evil as no other. No sloganeering will manage to hide the obvious: antisemitism gives anti-Zionism its fuel and passion, its semantics and archetypes. If 'woke' ideology has marked a moral progress, it is precisely in making us aware that misogyny, homophobia, and racism have deep structures. If it is true for these, it is no less true of antisemitism.

The time has come to unmask the imposture because transcendental anti-Zionism is deeply offensive to many or most Jews and does not serve the Palestinian cause. It prevents us from achieving the urgent tasks ahead: stop Israel's reckless destruction of Gaza, rebuild the Strip, give a humane future to Palestinians and create durable regional peace, and ensure a future Gazan leadership without genocidal aspirations against Israel. As long as our language is contaminated by antisemitism, and as long as anti-Zionism continues to perniciously conflate critique of Israel with its demonisation, we can only drift further away from these goals.

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