

## ANTISEMITISM EXPLAINED

### What is it?

The term antisemitism describes hostility, discrimination, prejudice, and violence toward Jews as Jews. Antisemitic rhetoric and behavior hold Jews collectively responsible for societal ills or perceived evils in the world, resulting in marginalization, persecution, and violence. Yet nailing down a formal definition of antisemitism can be challenging given how antisemitic ideas and images change over time and function differently in local and national contexts.

Drawing on elements of Christian theology and circulating across the western world and beyond, antisemitism today often takes the form of verbal and physical violence, stereotyping, Holocaust denialism, and conspiracy theories of nefarious Jewish economic, social, cultural, or political influence and control. As antisemitism conventionally comprises such paranoid fantasies of Jewish power, the real existence of a Jewish nation-state poses particular challenges for identifying it. Criticism of the state of Israel may serve as a vehicle for antisemitic rhetoric or behavior when it exaggerates the state of Israel's influence in global politics or holds Jews collectively responsible for Israeli state policies.

Antisemitism does not occur in isolation but rather appears in conjunction with other forms of discrimination, bigotry, and violence. And, like other forms of racism, antisemitism dehumanizes Jewish people, incites others to harass and exploit them, and manipulates popular resentments to reproduce an unjust status quo. Antisemitic rhetoric often portrays Jews as shadowy puppet masters who control those in power or disloyal interlopers seeking to corrupt and undermine social stability; Jewish people are thus blamed for threats to national health and security as well as inequalities resulting from capitalism. Antisemitism can consequently defuse legitimate criticism of existing political and economic systems and absolve those responsible for ongoing crises, inequality, and suffering.

Oppressive systems and individuals that stoke antisemitism can also coexist with a politics of philosemitism, which claims to protect and admire Jews. Like antisemitism, philosemitism uses generalizations and stereotypes about Jews to isolate and exceptionalize Jewish people, often recycling assumptions about Jewish otherness and distinguishing them from other minoritized groups. Sometimes philosemitic language and behavior – especially in the form of admiration or support for the state of Israel – can conceal underlying hostility towards Jews, reinforces antisemitic fantasies about Jews, and authorizes the demonization of other minoritized groups.

### Who is affected?

Antisemitism primarily targets Jews as well as people perceived as Jewish. However, vulnerability to antisemitic violence is not distributed equally. Within the Jewish community, those who appear most visibly and publicly Jewish (based on, for example, forms of traditional dress) face greater risk of attack. At the same time, the fear of Jewish invisibility and/or deceptive assimilation has been a feature of antisemitic thinking since the early twentieth century at least.

Antisemitism does not only impact Jews. Antisemitic conspiracy theories, such as the [‘Great Replacement’ Theory](#), often imagine Jews, Black people, LGBTQ+ people, Muslims, migrants, and other marginalized groups in a diabolical alliance to undermine white and Christian majorities or power. At the same time, antisemitic conspiracy theories can offer already disenfranchised communities a foreshortened but appealing channel to express resentment and frustration at those perceived with power. When individuals or groups from these communities draw on such conspiracy theories in their protests against injustice, they can in turn face disproportionate surveillance, repression, and criminalization. This reactionary instrumentalization of Jews creates a racialized cycle of antisemitic incitement and philosemitic punishment.

### **Instrumentalized accusations**

Accusations of antisemitism can misuse and misappropriate concerns about anti-Jewish prejudice to advance reactionary and repressive politics. These bad faith accusations isolate Jews from other minoritized groups and portray progressive political movements and actors as illiberal, hateful threats to freedom and democracy. Authoritarian individuals and regimes often use false accusations of antisemitism against others to promote repressive policies and agendas and absolve themselves of past or ongoing antisemitism. Such deceptive performances of philosemitism claim to protect Jews while dangerously endorsing an antagonism between the human rights and safety of Jewish people, on the one hand, and the human rights and safety of other minoritized groups, on the other.

Examples where instrumentalized accusations of antisemitism are used to advance political agendas include:

- 1) Conflating criticism of the state of Israel with antisemitism, such as through the adoption or promotion of the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\)](#) definition of antisemitism or by discrediting human rights accountability mechanisms as antisemitic.
- 2) [Anti-boycott legislation](#), which began as a way to penalize non-violent action for Palestinian human rights, has since been adopted to penalize non-violent protest in other issue areas.
- 3) The normalization of [anti-migrant](#), anti-Muslim, and carceral agendas through claims to protect Jewish communities (see [Reuters article](#))

### **Strategies to counter**

*Fighting antisemitism is part of the larger project of creating a just democracy.*

- / Interrupt scapegoating, stereotyping, and marginalization of all Jewish people targeted as Jews, regardless of political orientation
- / Build relationships with local Jewish groups to develop shared visions of justice, democracy, religious pluralism, and human rights.
- / Be rigorous in analyzing forms of both white and Christian supremacy and resist creating competitive hierarchies of suffering.
- / Address false accusations of antisemitism without denying the existence of antisemitism.

Please reach out to [info@diasporaalliance.co](mailto:info@diasporaalliance.co) to request training and further resources.