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**Re** → Explainer: Political Philosemitism

## Contents

[Summary](#): Philosemitism, like antisemitism, others Jews. Political philosemitism invokes support for Jews and Israel that is often a cover for advancing repressive policies.

[Background](#)

[Key Arguments](#)

- / **A.** Philosemitism does not cancel out antisemitism — and is often complemented by it
- / **B.** Philosemitism mimics antisemitism by making Jews the avatar for political or social crises — but does so in the name of protecting them
- / **C.** As an electoral strategy, philosemitism serves to either solidify or expand political bases of support

[Resources](#)

## Summary

The term philosemitism, which refers to claims of love, admiration, or protection of Jews, has had vastly different connotations over its relatively brief history. Although scholars have examined various examples of philosemitism as far back as the Middle Ages, especially a theological form in which Christians professed appreciation and respect for Judaism, the term itself originated in 19th-century Germany.

Philosemitism shares a key trait with antisemitism: it others and essentializes Jews and often invokes the same tropes, but simply cast in an ostensibly positive light. In this way, philosemitism and antisemitism are both informed by what the Brazilian scholar Michel Gherman has called “[the imaginary Jew](#)” — a repository of tropes and stereotypes that reinforces a particular worldview or ideology, and that is disconnected from the realities of Jewish life and the needs of Jewish communities.

Some forms of philosemitism, for example, highlight the trope that Jews are “good with money” (which ties into the conspiracy theory that “Jews control the banks”) — a belief that has popped up from Eastern Europe to [East Asia](#) and in [popular culture](#) across the globe. Others rest on stereotyped and kitschy representations of Jews, such as the “[Disneyfied](#)” reconstructed Jewish quarters in various Eastern European cities. Still others comprise what can be called political philosemitism, which is the focus of this explainer: public declarations of support for Jews and Judaism, supposedly as a means of safeguarding Jewish communities, but serving underlying political motives that are not primarily aimed at benefiting Jews and in fact often end up [targeting Jews](#), especially those on the left or those who are critical of Israel and Zionism.

Political philosemitism can be found across the center and right of the political spectrum, and is most visibly at work in the U.S. and Europe in efforts to advance anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies and campaigns. This political smoke and mirrors relies on conflating Jews and Israel, and Jews and Zionism, in order to justify such repressive policies. The threat this poses to Jews and Muslims alike, as well as to other minority communities liable to be [caught up in the dragnet](#) of “protecting” Jews, makes political philosemitism one of the most prominent and dangerous ways in which Jews are instrumentalized. Moreover, by making Jews the face of repressive policies and actions — such as the Trump administration’s efforts to deport campus activists protesting the war on Gaza — state philosemitism risks fueling popular antisemitism.

## Background

The terms “philosemitism” and “antisemitism” were both coined by 19th-century German antisemites, with “philosemite” intended as an insult to those who were seen as opposing the political project of antisemitism (which, at the time, was widely understood as a force for good). A

philosemite, in other words, was not someone who necessarily viewed Jews as equals, but rather someone who did not subscribe to a totalizing antisemitic worldview — and was criticized for it.

The definition of philosemitism has expanded and shifted since then. It is sometimes understood as a laudable expression of admiration for Jews and Judaism, and has been retroactively applied to, for example, Christian [expressions](#) of theological respect for Judaism over the centuries.

**Yet philosemitism, like antisemitism, rests on underlying assumptions about Jews that are generally informed by stereotypes, tropes, and conspiracy theories.** This is most apparent with political philosemitism — a professed appreciation for, or heightened sensitivity to, Jews and Jewish concerns that in fact serves a wider, often repressive, political goal.

Political philosemitism today has evolved to meet a range of needs. Philosemitic Islamophobia casts Jews as paradigmatic victims of Islam, in a similar category to women and [LGBTQ people](#). This can be seen in the German government’s [many anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim initiatives](#), or the U.S.’s [invocation of women’s rights](#) in its bombing of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, or in the [widely-held view](#) in Europe that “imported antisemitism” from Muslim immigrants is the key threat facing Jewish communities in their countries (despite, for example, data from Germany in 2020 [showing](#) that over 90 percent of antisemitic incidents were attributable to the far right). Within this framework, the far right regularly casts itself as the political faction [best-placed to protect](#) these groups from Muslims.

These same elements are at work in another avenue of political philosemitism: pro-Israel rhetoric and policy. Here, political philosemites present Israel as both the “collective Jew,” wherein defense of Israel is defense of Jews writ large; and as a paradigmatic example of militarized ethnonationalism that especially the European far right sees as both a model and, [in the words of](#) Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders, “the West’s first line of defense against Islam.” Defending and supporting Israel therefore becomes a stand-in for defending “Western values.” In this way, philosemitic Islamophobia maps onto the Middle East context, in which Israel’s war on Palestinians takes on larger symbolism as part of the supposed war between “Judeo-Christian” civilization and “the Muslim/Arab world” — with Israeli leaders and officials frequently [playing into](#) this framing.

In conflating Jews and Israel — a tactic [driven](#) by the Israeli government itself over the decades — political philosemitism allows its proponents to engage in anti-Jewish rhetoric or behavior while claiming to defend against antisemitism. Elon Musk, for example, has made a string of [antisemitic comments](#), yet continues to be [embraced](#) by the Israeli government while often [avoiding](#) significant censure by the Anti-Defamation League. By promoting a philosemitism that is in fact about love for the state of Israel (in particular its militant, religious-settler wing), far-right actors — even those in political parties with current and former Nazi affiliations, for example — declare themselves

antisemitism-free. The Israeli government and its supporters frequently [give the appearance](#) of taking this sleight of hand at face value.

Moreover, political philosemites' claims of care for Jews are further undermined by their attacks on Jews who criticize Israel, or progressive Jews more broadly, or Jews whose other identities overlap with the various groups these actors are targeting. The late Dutch scholar Evelien Gans, writing about the Netherlands' Geert Wilders, [called](#) this phenomenon "selective philosemitism." These Jews often face their Jewishness being [questioned](#), derided, or outright denied. At the same time, those more visibly identifiable as Jews — for example, Orthodox Jews — are sometimes privileged as the "true Jews" while those who are secular or less religious are dismissed as [inauthentic](#). This differentiation also — as in the case of the Hungarian government's allying with the Chabad movement — helps reinforce a philosemitism that reinforces the distinction between "us" ("true" Hungarians) and "them."

Political philosemitism therefore performs two related functions: cover for Islamophobia and cover for actual antisemitism, where support for Israel justifies the former and obscures the latter. Addressing political philosemitism is key to confronting the conflation of Jews and Israel, as well as the conflation of criticism of Israel and antisemitism, and thus to opposing the authoritarian project of exploiting Jews and Jewish fears around antisemitism in order to advance repressive policies that persecute immigrants, Muslims, and other targeted groups.

## Key arguments

### A. Philosemitism does not cancel out antisemitism — and is often complemented by it

*Philosemitism on the far right works in tandem with — and often sanitizes — right-wing antisemitism, including religious antisemitism. This is in part because of how nationalist ideas around in-groups vs. out-groups have changed over the past few decades: whereas Jews used to be considered part of the out-group, the shift toward an Islamophobic communal identity — i.e. Western civilization vs. the Muslim/Arab world — has brought some Jews "into the fold," even as anti-Jewish ideology remains central to the far-right worldview.*

- / For much of the far right, and especially for far-right political parties, Islamophobia has largely overtaken antisemitism as its most visible prejudice — even as the latter remains an intrinsic part of the far-right worldview. The end of the Cold War and 9/11 accelerated the "West vs. Islam" narrative; while most of the Western political spectrum now subscribes to this view to some degree, its primary function for the political far right has been to allow it to paradoxically claim Jews as natural constituents — much as it has done with women and the LGBTQ community. In other words, as the scholar Rogers Brubaker

writes, “[p]hilo-Semitism [sic], the promotion of gender equality, and support for gay rights are used in strikingly similar ways in the civilizational discourse of the populist right: to highlight Islam’s backwardness in relation to Europe’s modernity.”

- / The resurgent global far right, which in Europe especially has been accumulating political power over the past two decades, frequently advertises itself as uniquely positioned to understand what Jews want and need — even as they or their parties indulge in bigoted rhetoric or behavior toward Jews. (See also DA’s [Global Far Right Explainer](#), which looks in more detail at the overlap between pro-Israel sentiment and antisemitism.)
  - ) Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has sought to build strong ties with the country’s Chabad movement even as he and his party have spearheaded an antisemitic dog-whistle campaign against the Hungarian-American financier George Soros — [triggering](#) conspiracy theories about Soros and immigration that have gone global. At the same time, members of Orbán’s government have [claimed](#) that the country’s anti-Muslim immigration policies have helped protect Hungarian Jews.
  - ) France’s Marine Le Pen, a member and former head of the far-right Rassemblement National (RN, formerly Front National), has [positioned](#) her party as a “shield” for French Jews against “Islamist ideology.” RN head Jordan Bardella has made similar [noises](#). Nonetheless, their party continues to run [political candidates](#) who engage in antisemitic behavior and who express admiration for historical French antisemites.
  - ) Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party has also [broadcast itself](#) as “good for the Jews,” with its leader in 2017 even going so far as to say that the party is “one of the few political guarantors of Jewish life in Germany” due to its [anti-Muslim politics](#). The party has consistently had members who have [trafficked](#) in antisemitic tropes and Holocaust revisionism.
  - ) Vlaams Belang, the Flemish ultranationalist party whose predecessor, Vlaams Blok, was founded by Nazi collaborators, has long courted Belgian-Jewish voters — seeing them, [according to former leader Filip Dewinter](#), as “natural allies” in the fight against Muslim immigration. Current leader Tom Van Grieken [has said](#): “If you want to stop antisemitism, you have to stop immigration.” Within the space of a few months in 2024, Vlaams Belang announced a minor Belgian-Jewish celebrity and a [convicted Holocaust denier](#) as candidates in Belgium’s upcoming local elections (following criticism, it retracted the candidacy of the latter within 24 hours).
- / Far-right philosemitism is often articulated through an Islamophobic domestic agenda and a pro-Israel foreign agenda, with obvious overlap between the two.
  - ) All of the above leaders and parties, as well as [Donald Trump](#) and the Republican Party, India’s [Narendra Modi](#) and his BJP, and Argentina’s [Javier Milei](#) and his Avanza Libertad party, among others, have expressed strong support for Israel. Many have also vowed to fight Israel-related and/or “imported” antisemitism, even

as their parties' rank and file have deployed clear antisemitic rhetoric.

- / Evangelical philosemitism, particularly in the United States, shares many of the above characteristics, including that it is part of a broader project to protect “Western civilization” — reflecting, for example, the belief among the Christian right that “traditional” Judaism shares conservative Christianity’s “family values” — while pursuing Islamophobic policies. Yet evangelical philosemitism is also [driven by](#) end-times theology that is, paradoxically, antisemitic, and which is largely reflected in evangelical leaders’ staunch support for Israel.
  - ) Although evangelical leaders may profess support for Jews and valorize the idea of “Judeo-Christian values” — which was [cooked up](#) during the Cold War as an “ecumenical marketing meme for combatting godless communism” — they also work to impose a domestic [conservative Christian](#) agenda that poses a threat to Jewish religious freedoms.
  - ) John Hagee, an evangelical pastor and the head of Christians United for Israel (see DA’s [Christian Zionism explainer](#)), the largest pro-Israel lobby group in the United States, has previously [said](#) that God let Hitler carry out the Holocaust in order to hasten Jews’ return to Israel. Hagee frequently [condemns](#) critics of Israel as antisemites.
  - ) The late co-founder of the Moral Majority and early televangelist Jerry Falwell [claimed](#) that Jews in the United States and Israel had “no dearer friend” than he. He also [believed](#) that the Antichrist would “of course” be Jewish.

**B. Philosemitism mimics antisemitism by making Jews the avatar for political or social crises — but does so in the name of protecting them**

*From the culture wars over DEI and higher education to efforts to constrict the public sphere in support of Israel and Zionism, political philosemitism centers Jews in high-profile, fraught debates about curbing basic freedoms in order to ostensibly safeguard Jewish communities — while risking blowback against those same communities. At the same time, philosemites frequently exclude leftist and anti-Zionist Jews, as well as Jews of other marginalized identities, from their efforts.*

- / Many initiatives that claim to oppose antisemitism and care for Jews are presented as a response to some kind of immediate crisis. These initiatives disproportionately target progressive movements in general, and Palestinians and their supporters in particular, and are fronts for a wider crackdown on basic rights and freedoms.
  - ) In the U.S., the Heritage Foundation’s “Project Esther” — a [sweeping blueprint](#) aimed at delegitimizing, censoring, and criminalizing entities and individuals that express support for Palestinian liberation under the pretext that they are supporting

terrorism — takes this tactic to its extreme. Philosemitic to the point of claiming it needs to save Jews from themselves, Project Esther argues that the U.S. government needs to step in and rescue the American-Jewish community from the infiltration of alleged Hamas supporters into nearly every walk of U.S. life, including Jewish anti-Zionist organizations. Project Esther represents the right wing's broad assault on civil liberties and its push to accelerate the defunding, criminalization, and even deportation of foreign students and professors protesting the slaughter in Gaza.

- The March 2025 arrest and threatened deportation of [Mahmoud Khalil](#), a Palestinian student activist who is a U.S. legal permanent resident, made clear the threat of such policies to those directly in their crosshairs. Yet the Trump administration's framing of the arrest — [sharing](#) photos of Khalil online with the caption “Shalom, Mahmoud” — also points to the risk to Jewish communities of such repression: making Jews the face of authoritarianism has the potential to fuel antisemitism while stoking conspiracy theories about outsized Jewish power. This mechanism mirrors its antisemitic parallel, in which conspiracy theories about George Soros made Jews the face of demographic change and increased immigration — and [provoked](#) lethal far-right antisemitism in response.
- ) Right-wing attacks on DEI in the U.S. paint such initiatives as both [antisemitic](#) and “[anti-white](#),” which rhetorically connects Jews to efforts to uphold white supremacy. The anti-DEI push also portrays Jews as victims of the left in need of the right's protection — following the same operating logic as philosemitic Islamophobia, in so doing also justifying right-wing repression of progressive movements.
- ) Germany's center-right federal government and several state governments have proposed various restrictive measures ostensibly aimed at protecting Jews but that in practice severely [curtail freedom of speech](#), restrict access to naturalization by requiring that new citizens [recognize](#) Israel's right to exist, and [banning protests](#) in support of Palestine.
- ) A non-binding motion [passed](#) by the Dutch government in May 2024, which states that chanting “from the river to the sea” is an act of criminal incitement, came less than a year after a Dutch court [ruled](#) that the phrase was protected speech. The far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) MP who proposed the motion [said](#) it was a response to an increase in antisemitism in the Netherlands.



- ) In the U.K., protesters and activists in Palestine solidarity groups face [increasing repression](#) and criminalization, including under anti-terror laws — a trend that began under the Conservative government and has continued under Labour.

**C. As an electoral strategy, philosemitism serves to either solidify or expand political bases of support**

*Philosemitism plays a consistent role in election campaigns and base-building across different regional contexts and different parts of the political spectrum. In so doing, philosemitism — as it does with political crises — makes Jews the face of political parties' electoral fortunes and risks provoking antisemitism when those parties either win power and implement repressive policies, or fall short in their electoral aims.*

- / Along with seeking to reassure Jewish constituents about their commitments to Israel and supposedly to Jewish safety (often through punishment of Muslim and pro-Palestine communities), centrist campaigns police the boundaries of acceptable discourse and politics by championing a kind of Zionist identity politics — and treating support for Israel as a marker of tolerance and civilization.
  - ) In the U.S., the Democratic Party establishment, although increasingly challenged by its progressive cohort, remains steadfastly committed to a politics of unconditional support for Israel.
    - This was typified by the Biden administration's effective [carte blanche](#) for Israel's destruction of Gaza and devastating assault on Lebanon. This, in turn, informed Kamala Harris' campaign for president, during which she [declined](#) to break from Biden in her response to Israel's war on Gaza and in which the party [refused](#) to allow a Palestinian-American speaker to address the Democratic National Convention, despite good-faith efforts by Palestinian organizers and politicians to do so.
    - This policy was also underscored by Biden's [repeated claims](#) that without Israel, "no Jew in the world would be ... safe" — comments that at once cast Jews as in need of special protection (and arming Israel as the predominant means of guaranteeing that protection) while also othering them; the then-U.S. president effectively claimed that he would be unable to protect the millions of Jews living in the U.S., casting them first and foremost as Jews rather than Americans.
  - ) The governments of French President Emmanuel Macron and U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer have used the justification of fighting antisemitism — whether it has occurred or not — to attack or sideline their political opponents — including, in the



case of Starmer, factions [within his own party](#) — and [crack down](#) on [civil liberties](#) in their respective countries.

- ) A similar impulse has been at work in Germany, which the philosopher Susan Neiman has [described](#) as a “philosemitic McCarthyism that threatens to throttle the country’s rich cultural life.” Although the [overwhelming majority](#) of antisemitic hate crimes in Germany are committed by the far right, the focus of the center-right government’s so-called anti-antisemitism efforts — and the media discourse that accompanies them — is nonetheless on Muslims and people of color, in particular immigrants, with a disproportionate number of Jews also [caught up](#) in the country’s philosemitic censorship.

/ Far-right efforts at Jewish voter outreach have increased over the past decade, seeking to capitalize on backlash to increased Muslim immigration to Europe as a result of the Syrian civil war — and following a similar logic to far-right attempts at courting e.g. LGBTQ voters.

- ) The Netherlands’ PVV, and especially its leader Wilders, have long set the tone on political philosemitism. In the November 2024 Dutch elections, the PVV and Wilders [seem to have benefited](#) from a late shift in support from Jewish voters who believed — amid reports of rising antisemitism — that the party, despite its extremism, would offer the most effective defense of their community.
- ) The AfD in 2018 [launched](#) a Jewish voters’ group, and has [run](#) a number of Jewish candidates in local elections.
- ) Under Marine Le Pen, [Rassemblement National](#) has for years made efforts to appeal to Jewish voters. These efforts finally seemed to bear fruit in the run-up to the 2024 French elections, with prominent French-Jewish public figures [coming out in support](#) of RN in part due to increasing antisemitism in France in the wake of October 7. While the far right ended up losing the election handily, the campaign revealed a burgeoning political alignment between the far right and parts of the French-Jewish community.
- ) The U.S. Republican Party has long speculated that a mass defection of Jewish voters from the Democratic Party is only a matter of time, despite the absence of any electoral data to suggest this is the case. Nonetheless, the GOP — especially under Trump, and despite its openly [appointing](#) antisemitic white nationalists to high-level positions — consistently [campaigns](#) on highlighting itself as the most “pro-Israel” party and the party most likely to defend Jews, and American values, from the progressive movement, and particularly the Palestine liberation movement.

## Resources

- / Rogers Brubaker, "[The New Language of European Populism](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, December 6, 2017
- / Daniel Cohen, "[Towards a History of 'Philosemitic' Europe Since 1945](#)," *Europe Now Journal*, November 2, 2017
- / Michael Colborne, "[Rise of a New Far-right: The European 'Philosemites' Using Jews to Battle Muslims](#)," *Haaretz*, October 21, 2017
- / Evelien Gans, "[Anti-Antisemitic Enthusiasm and Selective Philosemitism: Geert Wilders, the PVV, and the Jews](#)," talk delivered at *Jewish Museum Berlin*, November 2013
- / Misha Klein, "[Philosemitism Without Jews: Brazilian Political Uses of the Imaginary Jew](#)," talk delivered at UT Austin, April 17, 2024
- / Susan Neiman, "[Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire](#)," *New York Review of Books*, October 19, 2023
- / Hannah Rose, "[The New Philosemitism: Exploring a Changing Relationship Between Jews and the Far Right](#)," *ICSR*, November 2020