



# The Weaponisation of Antisemitism

January 2024

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London | Washington

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# Background

**ZERO  
TOLERANCE  
FOR  
ANTISEMITISM**



# 01

## Background

Antisemitism is often cited as the most ancient hatred, with roots in Christianity<sup>1</sup>. Retellings of the Exodus story portray Jews as undesirable intruders who were expelled from Egypt because they brought a plague.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the first recorded instances of antisemitism date back to writings from the Greek and Roman empires, where Jews are accused of unsociability and separatism.<sup>3</sup> In 66 AD, around 50,000 Jews were killed by the Greeks, and in 115 AD the Romans confiscated Jewish property and land.<sup>4</sup>

Anti-Judaism continued through the medieval period. Between 1100 and the 1800s, Jews were expelled from cities across Europe thousands of times.<sup>5</sup> For example, in Spain in 1391, during the Holy Week of Easter, Christians attacked Jews — without authorisation from the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

Anti-Jewish attacks were generally not about Jews as people, or about their religious differences.<sup>7</sup> The attacks were primarily about their fragile status in society, their position as “outsiders,” and about the useful role outsiders can play for leaders and others as scapegoats during times of crisis.<sup>8</sup>

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# Definition of Antisemitism



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# Definition of Antisemitism

The term ‘antisemitism’ was popularised by German journalist Wilhelm Marr in 1879 to describe hatred or hostility toward Jews.<sup>9</sup>

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) adopted its definition of antisemitism in 2016, which states that “antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews.<sup>10</sup> Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities”.<sup>11</sup>

Antisemitism refers to ideas and behaviours which discriminate against, target or harm Jews because they are Jews.<sup>12</sup> Claims that Jews are stingy, that they rule the world, or run the banks are antisemitic. Similarly, physical or verbal attacks against Jewish people because of their Jewishness is antisemitic.<sup>13</sup>

The IHRA’s working definition is the most widely used definition of antisemitism in the West.<sup>14</sup> However, some of its “contemporary examples of antisemitism in public the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere” which pertain to Israel are deeply problematic:

- “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterise Israel or Israelis.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”<sup>15</sup>

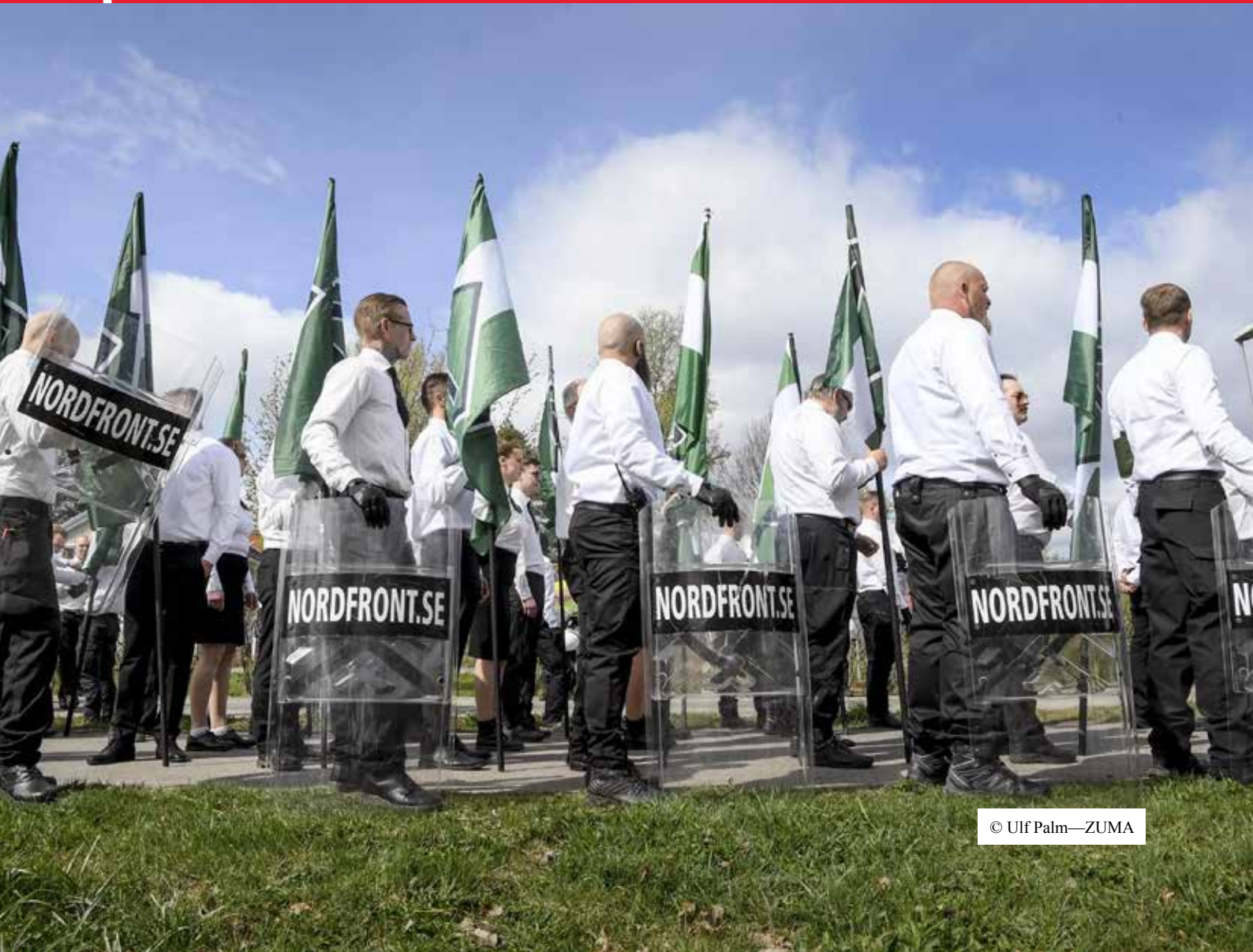
These ‘examples’ of antisemitism are used to wrongly label criticism of Israel as antisemitic, as opposed to anti-Zionist.<sup>16</sup> More than 60 human rights organisations and 120 scholars have urged the UN not to adopt this definition of antisemitism.<sup>17</sup>

Alternative definitions include the Jerusalem Definition of Antisemitism, which defines the term as “discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish)”.<sup>18</sup>

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# Antisemitism: A European Legacy



# Antisemitism: A European Legacy

Christians made anti-Judaism into a core theological and political ideology.<sup>19</sup> Christianity had to show that it had overcome Judaism's adherence to the laws of the 'old' testament and tribal particularity with evangelical universalism.<sup>20</sup> The idea of Judaism and that people chose to remain Jews was an affront to that universalism.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the centuries, European theologians returned to this idea in order to generate religious enthusiasm or quash perceived heresy.<sup>22</sup> Christians fighting Christians often labelled each other Jews as they struggled for supremacy.<sup>23</sup> Luther and Erasmus agreed that "if hatred of Jews makes the Christian, then we are all plenty Christian."<sup>24</sup>

## Early Antisemitism

Early European Christians vilified Judaism in a bid to gain more converts.<sup>25</sup> They accused Jews of outlandish acts such as "blood libel"—the kidnapping and murder of Christian children to use their blood to make Passover bread.<sup>26</sup>

When Pope Urban II called for the liberation of Jerusalem in 1095, the biblical tropes of Jews as Christ killers and devils inspired Christian crusaders to slaughter thousands of Jews.<sup>27</sup>

During the medieval period, some European countries required Jews to distinguish themselves from Christians with a yellow badge worn on their garment, or a hat called a Judenhut.<sup>28</sup> Jews were denied citizenship and civil liberties, including religious freedom throughout much of medieval Europe.<sup>29</sup>

From 1400 to 1600, Western Europe had a very small number of Jews as most had been banished.<sup>30</sup> Throughout this period, European Jews were denied citizenship and forced to live in ghettos.<sup>31</sup> But during this period, Christian Europe - especially

its prominent theologians - became haunted by the conviction that it was becoming Jewish.<sup>32</sup>

In 1523, Martin Luther accused the Roman Church of becoming "more 'Jewish' than the Jews," and stated that "so thoroughly hopeless, mean, poisonous, and bedevilled a thing are the Jews that for 1400 years they have been, and continue to be, our plague, pestilence, and all that is our misfortune".<sup>33</sup>

During the 19th and early 20th century, anti-Jewish riots called pogroms swept the Russian Empire. Pogroms were often encouraged and aided by the government and police forces.<sup>34</sup> After the Russian Revolution, about 1,326 pogroms took place in Ukraine alone, leaving nearly half a million Ukrainian Jews homeless and killing roughly 30,000 between 1918 and 1921.<sup>35</sup> Pogroms in Belarus and Poland also killed tens of thousands of people.<sup>36</sup>

This deep history of thought formed the ideological foundation for a genocide of Jews, like the Holocaust, to take place.<sup>37</sup>

## The Holocaust

The Nazis undertook an "aryanisation" of Germany, in which Jews were dismissed from civil service, Jewish-owned businesses were liquidated and Jewish professionals, including doctors and lawyers, lost their clients.<sup>38</sup>

The 1935 Nuremberg Laws introduced many antisemitic policies and outlined a definition of who was Jewish based on ancestry.<sup>39</sup> Nazi propagandists convinced the German public to believe that Jews were a separate race.<sup>40</sup> According to the Nuremberg Laws, Jews were no longer German citizens and had no right to vote.<sup>41</sup>



## Antisemitism: A European Legacy continued...

Jews became persecuted thereafter. This culminated in a state-sponsored campaign of street violence known as Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass), which took place between November 9-10, 1938.<sup>42</sup> In two days, more than 250 synagogues across the Reich were burned and 7,000 Jewish businesses looted.<sup>43</sup>

The morning after Kristallnacht, 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps.<sup>44</sup>

Between 1939 and 1945, the Nazis used concentration camps to systematically murder roughly 6 million European Jews in what was later known as the Holocaust.<sup>45</sup>

## 21st Century

Today, antisemitism is prolific amongst right-wing Europeans and Americans. In 2018, Charlottesville, Virginia witnessed a far-right demonstration with “Blood and Soil” chants and “Jews will not replace us” placards, whilst there were also attacks on synagogues in Sweden and arson attacks on kosher restaurants in France.<sup>46</sup> Many of the right-wing protestors who stormed the US capitol carried signs with the swastika on them.<sup>47</sup>

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# Conflation of Antisemitism with Anti-Zionism



# Conflation of Antisemitism with Anti-Zionism

Israeli lobbies and right-wing media have aimed to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism, especially in Europe and the US.<sup>48</sup> They falsely and baselessly claim that anti-Zionism would “entail extinguishing the lives of millions of Jews”.<sup>49</sup>

In comparison to Judaism, which is both a religion and ethnicity, Zionism is a nationalist ideology that helped establish the state of Israel in 1948.<sup>50</sup> It contends that the Jewish people have a right to self-determination in historic Palestine, which Zionists view as Jews’ ancestral homeland.<sup>51</sup>

Many Christians are also Zionists, who believe that the return of Jews to Israel will precipitate Jesus’ return to Earth.<sup>52</sup> US President Joe Biden, for example, has described himself as a “proud Zionist”.<sup>53</sup>

Anti-Zionists oppose this nationalist ideology, and the idea of Palestine as a Jewish state, but this does not equate to prejudice against Jewish people.<sup>54</sup> Claiming that anti-Zionism is antisemitism uses Jewish suffering to erase the Palestinian experience and denies the Palestinian people the right to self-determination and to live as equal citizens in their land.<sup>55</sup>

Jews can be Zionist or anti-Zionist, indeed, many American Jews are anti-Zionist. Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), one of the largest anti-Zionist Jewish organisations, “unequivocally oppose[s] Zionism because it is counter [to the] ideals [of justice, equality and freedom for all people]”.<sup>56</sup> The organisation determines that “Zionism was a false and failed answer to the desperately real question many of our ancestors faced of how to protect Jewish lives from murderous antisemitism in Europe. [...] the Zionism that took hold and stands today is a settler-colonial movement, establishing an apartheid state where Jews have more rights than others. Our own history teaches us how dangerous this can be”.<sup>57</sup>

The deliberate conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism is rife amongst Israeli lobbies and right-wing Western media.<sup>58</sup> This false conflation results in baseless accusations of antisemitism directed at pro-Palestinian voices, which has the deeply concerning effect of making all charges of antisemitism, including very real ones, less convincing.<sup>59</sup> Accusing everyone criticising Israeli settler-colonialism of being antisemitic is extremely dangerous because it will eventually begin to cast doubt on the existence of very real, damaging antisemitism.<sup>60</sup>

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# Positioning of Arabs as Antisemitic



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# Positioning of Arabs as Antisemitic

Since the Nakba, extensive Israeli efforts have gone into positioning Arabs as antisemitic, a narrative which was also pushed by Euro-American commentators post-9/11 as emblematic of a falsified clash between Judeo-Christianity and Islam.<sup>61</sup>

To do so, Israel created the word ‘Mizrahim’ to refer to Arab Jews, to strip Arab Jews of their long histories of coexistence in the Arab world.<sup>62</sup> The Israeli Mossad is also believed to have carried out attacks against Iraqi Jews in Baghdad in 1950, designed to create fears of Arab antisemitism that would force the exodus of Arab Jews to Israel.<sup>63</sup>

Western propaganda has also portrayed Arabs and Muslims as antisemitic to detract from Europe’s own antisemitism. For example, on the anniversary of Kristallnacht in 2020, the German public broadcast company ZDF broadcast Khasin’s feature film “Das Unwort” about antisemitism in schools.<sup>64</sup> In the film, a Jewish boy in a Berlin high school is harassed and bullied by the other children, most of whom are Muslim. In one brawl, he breaks the nose of a boy of Iranian origin, and bites the earlobe of a Palestinian boy.<sup>65</sup> Despite Germany’s history of antisemitism, the film locates antisemitism as a Muslim issue.<sup>66</sup>

Although antisemitism exists in the Arab world, the deliberate attempt to portray anti-Zionism as antisemitism has made the issue of antisemitism in the Arab world seem larger, and more historically rooted than the reality – which is that antisemitism in the Arab world has risen mostly since Israel began its ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and occupation of Palestinian, Egyptian, and Syrian land.<sup>67</sup>

The consequence of the conflation between anti-Zionism and antisemitism is that voices speaking about the plight of the Palestinian people and their aspirations for freedom and liberation are branded ‘antisemitic’ and thus condemned and censored.<sup>68</sup> This contributes greatly to the marginalisation of Palestinian and Arab communities in the West by creating the perception that these communities are intrinsically hateful.<sup>69</sup>

## After 7 October

The events of 7 October have been labelled the “worst antisemitic attack since the Holocaust”.<sup>70</sup> However, this assumes that the aim of the attack was “Jews as Jews”, rather than Zionists as occupiers, settlers, and soldiers.<sup>71</sup>

The charge that the 7 October attack was antisemitic in motivation also strips the attack from its socio-political and historical context.<sup>72</sup> The attack did not occur in a vacuum, but rather was the result of the 75 year colonial occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, in addition to the siege of Gaza since 2007, and four Israeli bombardments of Gaza in the past 18 years.<sup>73</sup> The attack on 7 October therefore should be understood as an instance of colonised people retaliating against their colonisers and the enforced blockade, rather than as Muslims, specifically Palestinians, attacking Jews for their religion or ethnicity.<sup>74</sup>

The 7 October attack has been used as an opportunity by pro-Israel politicians to further entrench the idea that anti-Zionism equals antisemitism.<sup>75</sup> In December 2023, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution that equates anti-Zionism with antisemitism, and condemns the slogan “From the River to the Sea”, which rights advocates understand to be an aspirational call for equality in historic Palestine.<sup>76</sup>

UK politicians such as the former Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, have also tried to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism since 7 October. She claimed that: “‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’ should be understood as an expression of a violent desire to see Israel erased from the world”<sup>77</sup> and labelled pro-Palestine protesters ‘hate marchers’.<sup>78</sup> This rhetoric by politicians has coincided with a wider crackdown and policing of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices throughout the US and Europe since 7 October, by branding them as antisemitic or Hamas supporters.<sup>79</sup>

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