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Antisemitism

Charges of antisemitism weaponized

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The rise of a new McCarthyism in the United States and elsewhere in the Western world, fueled by the drive to quell criticism of Israel over its genocidal war against Palestine, is producing an unprecedented level of suppression of free speech and expression — both inside and outside of the academy.

In some respects, it is even more dangerous than the McCarthyism of the 1950s, which tended to target well-known figures in government, entertainment and education. The effort to stifle expressions of solidarity with Palestine and condemnation of the Zionist project is now reaching into all levels of society, placing potentially anyone in the position of being silenced and dehumanized.

Central to this effort is the weaponization of the charge of antisemitism against critics of Israeli imperialism. This is of course not new: the effort to smear critics of Zionism with antisemitism has been a staple for supporters of the Israeli state for many years. Yet since Hamas' brutal attack of October 7, 2023 it has reached a whole new level.

What is new today is the coalescence of two seemingly opposed political tendencies that both work to demonize critics of Israel: far-Right Populists driven by a clearly racist agenda, and left-of-center neoliberals who present themselves as fair-minded democrats defending diversity and inclusivity.

Coalescence of Attacks

The Republican Right is consumed with purging schools of curricula that critically analyze race, gender and sexuality as part of an effort to counter the heightened social consciousness produced by the massive protests for Black lives in 2020. It is now extending this to penalize anyone in the academy who criticizes Israel — and it is being joined in this effort by many Democrats.

The coalescence of Republicans aiming to shut down critical discourse and mainstream Democrats (including many liberal ones) trying to suppress criticism of Zionism places the liberals in a difficult position — the last thing they want to be accused of is being indifferent to DEI initiatives or facilitating the far-Right's effort to destroy what is left of U.S. democracy.

Yet this is precisely what they are doing in accepting the premise that attacking Zionism and the genocidal policies of the Israeli state are inherently antisemitic.

The irony here is that it is no secret that the far-Right's fervent defense of Israel is often accompanied by antisemitic stereotypes — from the notion that the world economy is governed by a cabal of "East Coast elites" (often with Jewish names) to the belief of many rightwing Evangelicals that the second coming of Christ will occur once the last Jew abandons her faith and embraces Christianity.

What Nazi ideologue Joseph Goebbels decried as "exaggerated Jewish cosmopolitanism" is exactly what the far Right has been railing against under a different name for years — with the new wrinkle that it is now coupled with total support for an Israeli state that massacres Muslims and Palestinians while acting as U.S. imperialism's closest ally.

A striking example of this was the “Take Our Border Back” rally in Texas on February 2, which included Sarah Palin, Ted Nugent and Christian nationalist Lara Logan as speakers. Michael Yon, a regular guest on Steven Bannon’s “War Room” podcast, also addressed the crowd, stating: “These immigrants flooding over our border is being funded by Jewish money — Jewish, that’s right — by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, they are funding the people to come here and shout ‘Allahu Akbar.’” [1]

Robert Bowers, who murdered 11 Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018 in the bloodiest antisemitic attack in recent U.S. history, justified his act by expressing animus for the HIAS’s support for immigrant rights.

No force in the United States today poses a graver threat to Jewish lives than the racist far-Right. Yet one would never know this from listening to Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, whose accusations of antisemitism against the Presidents of Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania led both to lose their jobs — even though Stefanik has befriended Nick Fuentes, an avowed antisemite and friend of her new-found mentor Donald Trump (she is a leading choice to be chosen to run as his Vice President).

Nor would one know this from the ranks of Nancy Pelosi, who has called students denouncing Israel’s murderous assault on Gaza paid agents of Russia — an odd charge, given that Putin’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recently declared, “Israel has similar objectives [in Gaza] to those of Russia” in Ukraine.

Antisemitism in Reality

The attack on leftwing critics of Zionism by left-of-center Democrats plays directly into the racist narrative of the far Right — regardless of how much they try to convince themselves of the contrary.

Some forces opposed to Israel are antisemitic, as in the Yemeni Houthi militia’s slogan, “Death to America, Death to Israel, a Curse Upon the Jews.” That does not justify the United States and its allies bombing Houthi bases in Yemen, showing they are more invested in the free movement of capital through the Red Sea than in lifting a finger to force Israel to halt its destruction of Gaza and its attacks on the West Bank.

Some leftists also harbor antisemitic views. If that were not the case, August Bebel wouldn’t have had to call popular antisemitism “the socialism of fools” 150 years ago. It is antisemitic to claim that all Jews by nature support Zionism or that all Israelis, regardless of their background or political beliefs, are accomplices in the genocidal acts of their government.

That there are two worlds in every country is a basic principle of Marxism — one that racists of all stripes virulently oppose. But there is no evidence that such antisemitic views characterize the outburst of protests against Israel by the new generation of activists that have flooded the streets in the past four months.

Muslims and Palestinians Under Attack

I reside in Chicago, home to the largest number of Palestinians of any U.S. city. Massive protests have been held by Palestinian and Muslim organizations protesting Israel’s genocide, often involving tens of thousands on a weekly basis. Organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace, Not in My Name, and IfNotNow (as well as large numbers of unaffiliated Jews) have been integrally involved in virtually all of them.

This culminated in a mass rally and sit-in on January 31 that led the City Council to approve a resolution, by 24 to 23 — Mayor Brandon Johnson cast the deciding vote — calling for a ceasefire and end to hostilities. It is the largest U.S. city to have done so. At none of these rallies and events were Jews made to feel unwelcome.

Alvin Tillery, director of the Center for the Study of Diversity and Democracy at Northwestern University, recently stated, “No Jewish students have really been subjected to violence on most of the campuses” — with the exception of an assault on an Israeli student at Columbia University and a bomb threat at a Jewish center at Cornell University (which turned out to come from a single unaffiliated disturbed student).

Tillery added, “There’s a huge generational divide on campuses, and young Jews are in the movement to support Gaza,” since they know “the Republicans all serve a master in Donald Trump, who is quoting Hitler in his speeches; people see through that.”

Nevertheless, Virginia Fox, a Republican Congresswoman from North Carolina and Chairwoman of the Education and Workforce Committee that has held hearings on antisemitism on college campuses, stated: “We want students to feel safe on their campuses, our number one issue is that Jewish students have not felt safe.” [\[2\]](#)

I have seen no evidence of this at the college where I teach at — which has campuses in both Des Plaines and Skokie, the latter a historically Jewish area that is now also home to many Muslims and Palestinians.

A short drive from my college is Plainfield, where Wadea al-Fayoume, a six-year-old Palestinian-American, was murdered in a hate crime on October 14. Some of my students attended his funeral.

While no overt harassment against Muslims that I knew of occurred at our college, several students told me that they were being harassed by their neighbors and verbally abused for being “terrorists.”

Many Palestinian youth are keeping a low profile and staying silent as a way to protect themselves — except when they join in the demonstrations. If any group has the right to say they don’t feel safe given the current political climate, it is Palestinians.

The most egregious aspect of this new McCarthyism is not the high-profile figures such as university presidents — tragic as that is. Worse is the silencing, the sense that one can’t say what one feels about the present moment out of fear of being tarnished with the smear of antisemitism.

This fear is ubiquitous in academia, on an assortment of levels. It impacts faculty as well, especially those without tenure or who work part time (over 70 percent of those teaching at public colleges in Illinois are adjuncts with little or no job protection).

Fanon on Antisemitism

To combat this effort to silence critical thought, discussion, and action it is important to keep in mind what defines antisemitism. One thinker who had a lot to say about this was Frantz Fanon, the outstanding theorist of race and racism.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon made the following observation:

“At first thought it may seem strange that the anti-Semite’s outlook should be related to that of the Negrophobe. It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who recalled the fact to me one day: ‘Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you.’ And I found that he was universally right — by which I meant that I was answerable in my body and in my heart for what was done to my brother. Later I realized that he meant, quite simply, an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro.” [3]

Fanon’s point was that all forms of racism, whether directed against Jews, Blacks or Arabs, share “the same downfall, the same failure of man.”

His evocation of Aimé Césaire’s comment that those who hate Blacks invariably hate Jews is no mere casual observation. It is a philosophic insight into their shared structure. He argued that Jews and Blacks are victims of substitution, that is, they are objects of misdirected frustration on the part of those who refuse to face the reasons for their social and psychic distress.

Of course, these racisms are different: “The Black man represents the biological danger; the Jews, the intellectual danger.” (127)

Blacks are viewed as sub-social, biological and physical; Jews are viewed as supra-social, controlling the world through their intellect. They suffer from radically different forms of substitution, but the content of dehumanization — insofar as they are viewed as objects to the point of not really being “seen” at all — is the same.

Fanon is crystal clear on this in declaring,

“Colonial racism is no different from any other racism. Anti-Semitism hits me head-on: I am enraged, I am bled white by an appalling battle, I am deprived of the possibility of being a man. I cannot disassociate myself from the future that is proposed for my brother.” (65)

It goes without saying that Fanon was fervently anti-Zionist. He was a leading figure in the Algerian Revolution, which Israel actively worked to subvert. Yet it would never occur to him to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism, since his critique of white racism was on behalf of advancing a struggle for universal human emancipation that transcends any narrow nationalist approach.

Today, the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism — whether by those on the Right or the Left — serves the purpose of rendering invisible the perspective of universal human emancipation, which Fanon referred to as a “New Humanism.”

Clarity on Antisemitism

For this reason, it is worth noting a more recent document that tackles the issue of Zionism and anti-Semitism — the Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism, penned by figures in Jewish as well as Middle East studies in March 2021, in response to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s conflation of criticism of Israel with hatred of Jews.

The Jerusalem Declaration states that it is not antisemitic to “criticize or oppose Zionism as a form of nationalism, or... support arrangements that accord full equality to all inhabitants ‘between the river and the sea,’ whether in two

states, a binational state, unitary democratic state, federal state, or in whatever form.”

Nor is it antisemitic, it states, to criticize “the conduct of Israel in the West Bank and Gaza, the role Israel plays in the region, or any other way in which, as a state, it influences events in the world. It is not anti-Semitic to point out its systematic racial discrimination” against Palestinians.

Moreover, “Criticism that some may see as excessive or contentious, or as reflecting a ‘double standard,’ is not, in and of itself, anti-Semitic.” [4]

Apologists for bourgeois society practice double standards all the time. The United States and European Union clearly do so in supporting Ukraine’s resistance to Russian imperialism while opposing Palestine’s struggle against Israeli imperialism. The same can be said for conservatives and liberals who rail against human rights abuses in China, Venezuela or Myanmar but have little or nothing to say about crimes committed by U.S.-allied regimes like Saudi Arabia, India or Guatemala.

The politics of the double standard also characterizes many leftists, as when Israel’s crimes against Palestine are correctly condemned while the Syrian regime’s murder of tens of thousands of civilians in Aleppo or Russia’s ethnic cleansing of the Ukrainian city Mariupol is not.

Free Discussion Needed!

While some leftists who employ double standards might be motivated by antisemitism, it is obvious that the vast majority are not. They are motivated by bad politics — or what amounts to the same thing, the mindset that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

The struggle against that mindset is one of the most important challenges facing the new generation of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist activists. A viable alternative to all forms of capitalism-imperialism cannot emerge without it. That is all the more reason to counter the ongoing effort by supporters of Israel to shut down free discussion and debate.

The fact that increasing numbers of Jews no longer accept the mythology of Zionism and stand in support of the Palestinian right for self-determination is driving the Zionists into fits of apoplectic frenzy.

Since they equate Israel’s continued existence as an imperialist-apartheid state with the maintenance their power and privilege, the last thing they want is for their lies to be exposed by those they claim to represent.

Weaponization of charges of antisemitism is therefore increasingly a cudgel to silence the views of leftwing and independent-thinking Jews. I leave that up to the reader to judge — is not such weaponization itself antisemitic.

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[1] "Far-right Convoy Protesting Migrant Crisis Nears Southern Border," by Jacob Rosen, CBS News, February 3, 2024.

[2] Quoted in "GOP to Extend Colleges Inquiry Beyond Antisemitism," by Anne Karni, The New York Times, January 6, 2024, A11.

[3] Black Skin, White Masks, by Frantz Fanon, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1988), 92. All page numbers in the text are to this edition.

[4] <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org>.