

Britain: Antisemitism, Zionism and the left - “In recent years there has been a concerted effort to redefine antisemitism to include opposition to Zionism”

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Roland Rance examines the issues.

Tory electoral strategist Lynton Crosby has gained notoriety for his “dead cat” tactic: when losing an argument, “throw a dead cat on the table”. However much this may disgust people, you can guarantee that the dead cat is what they will be talking about, any other issues will be forgotten. The right now seems to have found the smelliest of all dead cats, with their seemingly endless stream of largely spurious claims of antisemitism directed at Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour Party, and left activists in general.

This attack is a convergence of different forces and interests, each with a common target. There is the longstanding Israeli propaganda attack on supporters of Palestinian rights, which has been augmented by the growth of the solidarity movement as a result of Israel’s increasing brutality, and particularly by the strength of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign in response to the call of Palestinian civil society. This is an international campaign by the Israeli state though Britain, has been a key target for some time, with London identified as “the primary hub of the delegitimization network and campaign”.

The election of a prominent supporter of Palestinian rights to leadership of the Labour Party made this even more urgent, using to their advantage the resistance by many on the Labour right to Corbyn and to any move leftwards by the party, and the outright hostility by the Tories and their press supporters to Corbyn and to Labour as a whole. It is no coincidence that this issue burst into public during an election campaign marked by outright racism and Islamophobia.

Before examining the specific allegations, it’s necessary to be clear about language. The term “antisemitism” was coined by 19th century Jew-hater Willhelm Marr when he established his League of Antisemites, and means racism directed towards Jews. It is problematic for several reasons, not least its assumption that there is such a category as “semitism” which it opposes. Nor does it mean that Jews are Semites (which is really a linguistic, not an ethnological, term); and it does not usually refer to anti-Arab racism. Nevertheless, the term has been commonly accepted, and can be useful, so long as it is not used to suggest that the phenomenon is, in some manner, separate from racism.

It is clear, on the other hand, what the term “anti-Zionism” refers to. Zionism is a political ideology, and an organised movement with real bodies and membership. Although the term has sometimes

been abused by people who want a cover for their Jew-hatred, anti-Zionism is not inherently antisemitic. It is, of course, important to note that not only are not all Jews Zionists; neither are all Zionists Jews, and the antisemitic Christian right in the USA is very strongly Zionist.

However, in recent years there has been a concerted effort to redefine antisemitism to include opposition to Zionism or to a Jewish state. Proponents of this claim to have identified a “new antisemitism” directed against “Jews as a people”. They go on to argue that anti-Zionists deny to Jews uniquely the right to self-determination in the form of a nation state, and that this is clear antisemitism.

In support of this assertion, Israel’s apologists frequently refer to the “European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) Working Definition of Antisemitism”, asserting that this has the force of law in EU countries. This document was never an official EU statement; it was simply a submission to a body which was wound up in 2007. Its successor, the Fundamental Rights Agency, has removed the document from its website and archive, stating that it was “never valid” and “not an official EU definition”.

The argument is specious on many counts. In the first place, the assertion that Jews across the world form a separate national group, and that there is such an entity as “the Jewish people”, is itself a debatable, and hugely contested, political argument. Historian Shlomo Sand argues convincingly, in his best-selling book *The Invention of the Jewish People*, that this reading of Jewish history reflects a changing political imperative, and that prior to the mid-19th century historians of Jewish life did not use such an analysis.

In any case, even if we were to accept the existence of one “Jewish people”, this would not in itself provide a justification for a Jewish state, and certainly not in a land already populated by others. There are scores of “stateless nations”. Some, such as the Kurds and the Basques, live in a clearly identified region, where they form a majority or plurality and where they have been struggling for decades for political independence. Others, such as the Yoruba in Nigeria, or the Uyghurs in China, demand national autonomy rather than an independent state; the Jews in Tsarist Russia formed a similar community. And then there are the nations dispossessed and dispersed by European settler states, including the First Nations in North America, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, and indeed the Palestinians, whose right to national self-determination must take account of the existence in their land of other very large national communities, despite the manner in which these communities were implanted.

Nor should we accept the guilt-trip inherent in the demand to recognise “the right of Israel to exist”. As Marxists and internationalists, we do not recognise the right of any state to exist, and certainly not of a particular regime. For instance, we certainly do not accept the right of the United Kingdom to exist, opposing both elements of the state’s name. We did not accept the “right to exist” of the apartheid regime and system in South Africa, which depended on the exclusion of black South Africans, and nor should we accept the right to exist of the Zionist regime and system in Israel and the Occupied Territories, which depends on the exclusion of Palestinians.

The assertion that Zionism and support for Israel are an integral part of Jewish identity, which is at the heart of this argument, is in itself a deeply antisemitic position. It echoes the argument that Jews have a “dual loyalty”, that they are liable at the drop of a hat to betray the country in which they live. It ignores the large (and rapidly growing) number of Jews who reject the Israeli state and its pretensions to speak in the name of “the Jewish people”, and it obliges the much larger number who do not really have a position at all to identify as either “pro-Israel” (and thus proudly Jewish) or “anti-Israel” (and thus a treasonous self-hater).

In addition, this attempt to expand the meaning of the term antisemitism is already having the effect of discrediting the use of the term when appropriate, and of actually fostering racial antagonism towards Jews. After all, if someone watches a video of Israeli carnage in Gaza, of the destruction of entire areas and the slaughter of whole families, and is then told that any criticism of this is an attack on the Jewish people as a whole, they are likely to decide that, if this is what Judaism and Jewishness means, then maybe there really is a problem with “the Jews”.

And when activists are rightly enraged at the cynical misuse of allegations of antisemitism to smear supporters of Palestinian rights, they are less likely to listen in those instances when the allegations are indeed correct. [1]

In the current wave of allegations about members of the Labour Party, amid the ridiculous charge that the party is “riddled with antisemitism”, there is a melange of lies and misrepresentations, obsessive focussing on clumsy formulations or thoughtless flippant remarks, a repeated blurring of the distinction between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, and a few cases of what appears to be unequivocally anti-Jewish racism.

In many cases, these allegations arose after a trawl through activists’ social media comments, and one does not have to be a conspiracy theorist to note that this information, often dating back many years, only surfaced on the eve of crucial elections, at a time when the Tories were on the back foot while the Labour right was keen for a poor Labour showing in order to destabilise Corbyn’s leadership.

During the Labour leadership campaign, right-wing and pro-Israel sources attempted to create the impression that Jeremy Corbyn was himself antisemitic. This lie ran into the ground pretty quickly due to the total lack of credible evidence. Jewish activists quickly responded by setting up the group Jews for Jeremy, which was able to counter the charges speedily and effectively. It appears that, since his election as leader, the same groups have been conducting a systematic trawl through people’s social media accounts in order to discover any posts which could be misrepresented as antisemitic. The release of these, in a daily barrage, in the weeks before local elections was designed to do maximum damage to the Labour Party and to provide ammunition for a challenge to Corbyn’s leadership.

It is instructive to examine some of these charges. Vicki Kirby, vice-chair of Woking Labour Party, was suspended from the party after right-wing blogger Guido Fawkes “discovered” a 2011 tweet in which Kirby apparently claimed that Jews “have big noses and support Spurs”. Even though comedian David Baddiel confirmed that Kirby was simply retweeting a quote from his screenplay for the film *The Infidel*, she was pilloried for her alleged antisemitic position, and Corbyn was attacked for her membership of the party.

The witch-hunt then moved on to target Gerry Downing, a veteran trade union and socialist activist in London, who in a television interview unwisely referred to “the Jewish Question”. Although he insisted that he was using term in the same way as Karl Marx and Abram Leon, his comments, failed to recognise the significant change in context and meaning since Marx’s 1843 essay and Leon’s 1942 book. These comments were again taken out of context and used to present Downing as a rabid antisemite – a charge which is risible to those who know him, however strongly they may disagree with his views.

Next in line was Tony Greenstein [2], a very well-known anti-fascist and anti-Zionist campaigner from Brighton. Greenstein was told that he had been suspended as a result of “comments”; although the Labour Party has refused to tell him the nature and content of these comments, a dossier has been shown to the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, which shows clearly that it is his trenchant views

on Israel, Palestine and Zionism that are the heart of the objections. Greenstein has been prominent in the efforts to expose and oppose the influence of genuine antisemites, such as Paul Eisen and Gilad Atzmon, in the Palestine Solidarity movement, making the charges against him even less supportable.

A more prominent target was Bradford MP Naz Shah, suspended for allegedly saying that Israeli Jews should be transported to the USA. In fact, she did nothing of the sort; she merely retweeted (at the height of Israel's murderous onslaught on Gaza in August 2014) a graphic meme arguing that if the USA was so supportive of Israel, they could save money by re-establishing the state in the Mid-West. The graphic appears to have come from the website of Holocaust scholar Norman Finkelstein. Shah was also denounced for a Facebook post (now removed) calling on her Twitter followers to vote in an online *Mirror* poll, writing that "The Jews are rallying" – a charge confirmed by the Board of Deputies, which wrote that they "asked deputies to vote ... This importantly demonstrates the significance of efforts by all members of the community to support Israel". Although her use of words may have been unfortunate, Shah was not actually incorrect.

Following Shah's suspension, former London mayor Ken Livingstone was ambushed by pro-Israel Blairite MP John Mann, who barged in to an interview with Livingstone to attack him as a "Nazi sympathiser". [3] In an ill-thought out and off-the-cuff response, Livingstone pointed out that in the early years of the Nazi regime, there had actually been collaboration between the Nazi and Zionist movements. This is a highly sensitive issue for many of Israel's supporters, and those raising it need to be absolutely certain of their facts and terminology. Unfortunately, Livingstone made a number of (relatively minor) errors in his brief summary of parts of the book by US researcher Lenni Brenner in his 1983 book *Zionism in the Age of the Dictators*. This allowed his detractors (some of whom have been denouncing him for years) to force his suspension from the party. However, in his clumsy comments Livingstone managed to inform many more people about the scandalous Ha'avara Agreement than anti-Zionists have managed despite decades of reasoned explanation.

The most recent (as of the time of writing) target has been Jackie Walker, the black Jewish vice chair of Momentum. In a discussion about misuse of the Holocaust to provide a justification for Israeli brutality, Walker referred to slavery and the African holocaust, and noted that her ancestors had been involved in both sides of the slave trade. An unchallenged historical statement (that some Jews were involved in the slave trade) was presented as a racist attack on Jews. Walker is a prominent anti-racist activist, who played a significant part in the mobilisation in Kent against Farage and UKIP.

There are a number of significant aspects to this witch-hunt. Many of the alleged comments have been quoted completely out of context, none is actually antisemitic, some date back several years, and they have emerged following detailed scrutiny of social media accounts. Someone seems to be investing a great deal of effort into rooting out old comments which can be wrenched out of context and spuriously presented as antisemitic.

While the victims noted above were either themselves Jews, or were quoting the words of Jewish writers, this does not necessarily disprove the claim that they are antisemitic. It does, however, demonstrate clearly that much of this controversy is based on an internal Jewish discussion which has been hijacked by others for their own political ends. Indeed, one of the striking features of this controversy has been the almost complete absence of the voices of Palestinians, the principal victims of the Zionist project in the Middle East.

There is a long and honourable history of Jewish opposition to Zionism. The first Zionist Congress, in 1897, had to be moved to Basel, which had a minimal Jewish population, after the rabbis in Munich – where it was originally scheduled to meet – threatened to excommunicate any local Jew who assisted

or supported it. The 1917 Balfour Declaration (introduced by the same man who twelve years earlier had introduced Britain's first immigration act in order to exclude Jews fleeing Tsarist pogroms) was opposed as antisemitic by the only Jewish cabinet member. In the last free elections in Poland before Nazi occupation, the anti-Zionist Bund won a clear majority of the Jewish votes in both national and municipal elections.

Following the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel this tradition was weakened, but never disappeared. Jews have always been among the harshest critics of Zionism and Israel, and have faced a systematic campaign of smears and attacks. What we see now is the intersection of the Zionist attempt to delegitimise critics of Israel, with the desperate efforts by the Labour right (dubbed the "bitterites" by John Prescott) to discredit Jeremy Corbyn and replace him with one of their own. Some key figures (such as Mann and Luke Akehurst) are members of both of these camps.

Jewish activists have expressed extreme anger at this cynical misuse of the charge of antisemitism, which risks undermining opposition to real (rather than imaginary) instances of antisemitism. The Jewish Socialists' Group has objected to the "weaponisation" of such allegations, Independent Jewish Voices has complained of "a campaign of intimidation", while Jews for Justice for Palestinians has written that the charge "would be ludicrous if it were not so serious". Graham Bash, the editor of *Labour Briefing* (and partner of Jackie Walker) has written "As a Jew (all my life) and Labour Party member (48 years) I am outraged at the way allegations of anti-Semitism have been used to silence legitimate criticism of Israel and undermine Jeremy Corbyn as my party's leader".

Meanwhile, as if to remind us all that comparisons of Israel with Nazi Germany are not inherently antisemitic, at the height of this controversy the Israeli army's deputy chief of staff Yair Golan gave a speech on Holocaust Memorial Day (commemorated in Israel in May rather than January) in which he said "If there's something that frightens me about Holocaust remembrance it's the recognition of the revolting processes that occurred in Europe in general, and particularly in Germany, back then - 70, 80 and 90 years ago - and finding signs of them here among us today in 2016". Although he quickly issued a statement clarifying that he did not mean what he said, he was not pilloried and faced no calls for his dismissal. Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon confirmed his "full confidence" in Golan, and accused critics of "a politically motivated campaign" to damage the Israeli army. Labour Party leaders would have been well advised to respond similarly.

By now, several dozen people have been smeared and suspended from the Labour Party. Others, such as NUS President Malia Bouattia, who are not Labour members, have faced vilification for their views. But the campaign appears to be backfiring, since so many of the allegations are clearly risible attempts to defend the indefensible or to score sectarian points. There is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and of failing to take seriously any genuine antisemitism. And such a development would suit the Zionists perfectly, as can be seen in their cynical, almost gleeful, response to last year's attacks on Jewish targets in Paris.

The Labour Party has set up an independent enquiry to investigate the charges. But the vice-chair of the inquiry, Professor David Feldman (the director of Birkbeck College's Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism) has already been attacked by the Jewish Chronicle for his alleged membership of Independent Jewish Voices. So it would appear that nothing short of a McCarthyite tribunal will satisfy those running the campaign.

All supporters of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, all supporters of Palestinian rights, and all opponents of racism should join the call for an end to this witch-hunt, for the reinstatement to the Labour Party of all of those unjustly expelled or suspended on the basis of these fake charges, and for a transparent process to investigate any serious charges - as well as for an investigation into the naked Islamophobia displayed in the Tory mayoral campaign in London.

P.S.

* Socialist Resistance. May 16, 2016:

<http://socialistresistance.org/8399/antisemitism-zionism-and-the-left>

Footnotes

[1] In recent years there has been an attempt by antisemites, many describing themselves as “ex-Israelis” or “ex-Jews”, to infiltrate the Palestine solidarity movement and win it to a racist agenda. When these people first became active, some fifteen years ago, they did not express their antisemitic agenda, and many activists were initially misled and briefly worked with them. The most prominent representatives of this in Britain have been Paul Eisen and Gilad Atzmon. Eisen, an open Holocaust denier and friend of German Nazi Ernst Zündel, has met Corbyn both as a constituent, and as director of Deir Yassin Remembered (an organisation now proscribed by PSC). Atzmon is a jazz musician of Israeli origin, who has developed a career as a pundit and commentator on “Jewishness”; he has denounced both the Russian and Spanish revolutions as a Jewish conspiracy to steal wealth from non-Jews, and has gone beyond Holocaust denial to outright justification. He too has been denounced by leading Palestinian and anti-Zionist activists, and excommunicated by the solidarity movement.

[2] A personal note is appropriate here. In the mid-1980s, Tony and I, together with ANC representative George Johannes, were the principal targets of a witch-hunt in the National Union of Students, coordinated by the Union of Jewish Students. We were no-platformed at campuses across the country, after our views and comments were systematically misrepresented. A motion adopted by Manchester University Student Union even referred to me as “the most evil antisemite ever to have spoken” at the university! A petition in our support attracted many signatures; one of the first to sign was Jeremy Corbyn.

[3] John Mann, a former chair of the National Organisation of Labour Students, is currently MP for Bassetlaw. As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group against Antisemitism he has promoted the Zionist redefinition of antisemitism to include opposition to Zionism. After he appeared as a witness in a 2013 employment tribunal in which the University and College Union was falsely accused of antisemitism, the judge criticised his “glib evidence”, noting that he “enjoyed making speeches” but was “not at ease with the idea of being required to answer a question not to his liking.”