

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Racism, xenophobia (UK) > Jew (UK) > **A ‘no-go zone’ for Jews? The making of a moral panic in London**

A ‘no-go zone’ for Jews? The making of a moral panic in London

Monday 18 March 2024, by [REIFF Ben](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2024).

While antisemitism in the U.K. has certainly risen, politicians and the media are deliberately inflaming sensationalist narratives for a repressive agenda.

Contents

- [‘Evil intent’](#)
- [Dubious sources](#)
- [Unpacking the data](#)
- [Discomfort is not attack](#)
- [Most read on +972](#)

If you were a non-Jewish person living in the United Kingdom and didn’t know any better, you might think Jews are currently deserting London en masse. That’s certainly the impression you’d get from reading any of the major newspapers this past week.

“London’s antisemitism shame” was the headline [splashed across](#) the front page of the free commuter daily The Evening Standard on March 5, accompanied by a warning that “Jewish families plan to flee capital amid rising tide of hatred.” “London is now a no-go zone for Jews,” [proclaimed](#) the front page of the right-wing broadsheet The Daily Telegraph three days later. The liberal online news site The Independent went even further, [asserting](#) that British Jews are considering leaving the country altogether, because it “feels like Nazi Germany.”



Jews march within a large rally for a ceasefire in Gaza in central London, November 11, 2023. (Alisdare Hickson/CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

There has undoubtedly been a significant rise in antisemitism in the U.K. over the past five months, catalyzed by Hamas’ October 7 assault and Israel’s ongoing military offensive in Gaza. Even anecdotally, friends whose Judaism is more visible than mine have experienced a spike in harassment and threats while going about their day-to-day lives.

But this narrative of London becoming a “no-go zone” for Jews has been deliberately constructed and inflamed. Rather than stemming from concern for Jewish safety, it is being driven by a political agenda: to delegitimize and curtail the [mass demonstrations](#) in support of a ceasefire in Gaza that

have filled the streets of central London on a near-weekly basis over the past five months.

‘Evil intent’

Despite some mainstream Jewish [communal figures](#) dismissing the sensationalist headlines about London as untrue and unhelpful, the [established Jewish media](#) and major organizations entrusted with combating antisemitism are continuing to amplify them. Their interests, in effect, align with the Conservative government’s own ambitions to crack down on dissent against Israel’s campaign of [ethnic cleansing](#) and [starvation](#) in Gaza.

From the very beginning, there has been a concerted effort by government figures, echoed by much of the media commentariat, to create a moral panic around the ceasefire protests. Suella Braverman, who until November served as home secretary, repeatedly [smeared](#) the demonstrations as “hate marches.” (Braverman was eventually [sacked](#) after accusing the police of bias for not banning the protests altogether — a move that was widely understood as an opening gambit in her own bid for leadership of the Conservative party, with Labour [expected to take power](#) later this year.)



Then-Home Secretary Suella Braverman speaks at policing conference in Westminster, London, November 9, 2023. (Brandon Hattiloney/No 10 Downing Street/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED)

Braverman’s replacement, James Cleverly, continued where she left off and [suggested](#) the protesters evinced “real evil intent.” Meanwhile, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak recently [warned](#) police, in reference to pro-ceasefire demonstrations, that the U.K. is descending into “mob rule.” In a national address at the start of March, Sunak further [decried](#) a “shocking increase in extremist disruption and criminality” since October 7.

And yet, if you ask any of the hundreds of thousands of people who have actually attended the protests, they’ll wonder what on earth these politicians are talking about. For one thing, the arrest rate at the demonstrations is [lower than](#) at a typical football match or the annual Glastonbury music festival.

Moreover, the crowds are probably the closest thing you will find to a representative cross-section of British society: from toddlers to pensioners, and comprising virtually all ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. That includes a substantial [Jewish bloc](#), which some weeks has numbered [more than 1,000 people](#) — roughly tracking with Jews’ proportion in the British population as a whole.

So why the mass hysteria? There have certainly been isolated cases of protesters displaying offensive or racist placards within the marches. But the idea that these are typical of the protests as a whole — some of the largest in British history, peaking at more than half a million attendees in November — is ludicrous.

There has also been an attempt to vilify the rallies on the grounds that the popular chant “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” constitutes “a staple of antisemitic discourse,” as Braverman [put it](#), or even a call for genocide. On the contrary, most marchers will attest that it is a straightforward [call for the liberation](#) of the Palestinian people from decades of Israeli occupation

and apartheid — at a time when the International Court of Justice has deemed Israel’s own actions in Gaza to be [plausibly genocidal](#).



Thousands protest for a ceasefire in Gaza at a march in central London, November 4, 2023. (Alisdare Hickson/CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

Dubious sources

Seeing such bombastic declarations splashed across the front pages of Britain’s leading newspapers, one may wonder how many Jewish people are actually being hounded out of the capital or the country. The truth is that it’s hard to know, because between them those articles quote a grand total of *one* Jewish person who, according to The Independent, is considering packing their bags in the coming months.

The source of the Telegraph’s “no-go zone” headline is the British government’s counter-extremism czar, Robin Simcox, who offers nothing to substantiate the claim. The deposed Braverman [used](#) the same phrase in the newspaper earlier in the week; she, too, doesn’t back it with any evidence. A [similar headline](#) in Sky News quotes Jeremy Hunt, another Conservative MP and the current chancellor of the exchequer, whose evidence amounts to having “had emails from people.”

The Evening Standard offers us slightly more to go on, citing the results of a November [survey](#) by the Campaign Against Antisemitism which found that nearly half of the Jewish population nationwide has “considered leaving the U.K.” due to antisemitism since October 7. The article also refers to a [new report](#) by the Community Security Trust which documented over 4,000 antisemitic incidents across the U.K. in 2023 — the most in one year since the organization began collecting data.

But in both cases, these figures require no small amount of caveats. Despite its innocuous-sounding name, the Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA) is a decidedly right-wing organization — as its [posts](#) on X (formerly Twitter), or its [platforming](#) of [prominent racists](#) will affirm.

Formed in 2014 amid what was Israel’s deadliest assault on Gaza prior to the current offensive, its founding purpose, as the writer Michael Richmond recently [characterized it](#), “was to counter the antisemitism that arises in Britain when Israel pummels Palestinians and, implicitly, to defend Israel’s right to pummel.” To that end, the CAA organized a national “[March Against Antisemitism](#)” in late November, [positioning](#) it as a protest in direct opposition to the ceasefire marches.



Protesters at the National March Against Antisemitism, London, November 26, 2023. (Steve

Eason/CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

The CAA's chief executive, Gideon Falter, is also the vice chair of JNF UK. Despite distancing itself from the organization of the same name in Israel (Jewish National Fund—KKL), which for over a century has been a [central agent](#) in the [dispossession](#) and displacement of Palestinians, JNF UK has in recent years [funded](#) the fringe right-wing movement Hashomer Hachadash, which Haaretz [described](#) as "Israel's largest militia," to the tune of around \$1.3 million — as well as [funding](#) the CAA itself.

The Community Security Trust (CST), meanwhile, supplies security personnel for the protection of Jewish institutions across the country; it is also many Jewish people's first port of call after experiencing antisemitic abuse. In response to the CST's new report detailing a record spike in anti-Jewish incidents last year, Prime Minister Sunak [pledged](#) an additional £54 million (around \$70 million) of government funding to the organization over the next four years.

Like the CAA, however, the CST is no disinterested arbiter. For one thing, it appears to have an animus toward Jews who are critical of Israel — which is all the more concerning in light of [recent polling](#) showing that over a third of British Jews do not identify as Zionists.

In January, the CST reportedly [blocked](#) a group of left-wing Jews from joining a march against antisemitism that it had co-organized in Manchester (the CST [denies](#) this, despite video evidence). Last week, its chief executive, Mark Gardner, [claimed](#) in a BBC radio interview that the only kinds of Jews attending the ceasefire marches are either ultra-Orthodox (a reference to the Neturei Karta sect, which rejects the State of Israel on religious grounds) or "revolutionary socialists" who are "using their Jewishness so that people get the impression that this movement is not fundamentally antisemitic."

Unpacking the data

But what of the CST's widely-cited statistics themselves? While a spike in antisemitism has certainly been felt across the U.K., a close examination of the report raises a number of red flags that should disqualify it from being parroted unquestioningly.

For starters, on the very first page of the executive summary, the CST argues that the record number of antisemitic incidents during the week following October 7 indicates that "it was the Hamas terror attack, rather than Israel's military response in Gaza, that sparked most of the antisemitism," and that this therefore constituted "a celebration of Hamas' massacre."



Thousands protest for a ceasefire in Gaza at a march in central London, October 28, 2023. (Steve Eason/CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

This is an irresponsible claim for two reasons. First, by Oct. 11, Israel had [already killed](#) roughly the same number of Palestinians in Gaza as the number of Israelis and foreign nationals killed during the Hamas-led assault four days earlier. And second, the CST's own data shows that antisemitic incidents in the U.K. always surge in parallel with Israeli offensives on Gaza, irrespective of

Palestinian attacks (its previous records were in [May 2021](#), [July 2014](#), and [January 2009](#)).

Another major red flag surrounds the issue of distinguishing criticism of Israel from antisemitism. In the report's introduction, the CST cites the [much derided](#) International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism as "a useful guide in identifying different types of antisemitic language." This definition concerns itself largely with [examples](#) relating to criticism of Israel. It has been widely castigated by [academics](#), [activists](#), [civil liberties groups](#), and even its [lead author](#) for the way in which it has been weaponized to stifle free speech in support of Palestinian rights.

This conflation is borne out in the figures cited in the CST report. Of the 4,103 incidents logged in 2023, nearly one-third (1,299) "exhibited anti-Zionist motivation." The report does not offer any additional information as to the specific details of these incidents, only that "deciding on where the dividing lines lie [between criticism of Israel and antisemitism] is one of the most difficult areas of CST's work."

One category that illustrates this tension relates to the defacing of posters displaying photos and biographical information of the Israelis kidnapped by Hamas and other militant groups on October 7. The report states that 53 incidents were recorded "in which these posters were either ripped down or scrawled upon with antisemitic abuse."

Yet there is clearly a substantive difference between ripping down a poster — an act that could, for example, be born of frustration with the fact that they make no reference to the Palestinians being slaughtered in Gaza — and defacing it with antisemitic abuse (this page of the report is illustrated with a photo of a poster of a kidnapped Israeli baby that was vandalized with a swastika). In order to be able to have confidence in their figures, more transparency around the CST's decision-making process in cases like these is essential.



Police block a march in support of Palestinian rights in London, May 24, 2021. (Alisdare Hickson/CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

It is also worth noting that among the more than 4,000 incidents recorded in 2023, almost a third were online (the majority of them on X); as with any online harassment, however, it is not always clear where the abusive user is based or if it is even a real person. Only 6 percent of the incidents recorded constituted "assault," none of which were classed as "extreme violence."

While each one of these incidents is a serious crime, breaking down the numbers is crucial to making a sober assessment of the problem, and to dispel some of the panic and hysteria surrounding the CST's report and others like it.

Discomfort is not attack

Notwithstanding these reasons to give pause, it cannot be ignored that nearly half of British Jews surveyed by the CAA said they considered leaving the U.K. due to antisemitism since October 7.

The U.K.'s Jewish community is, for obvious historical reasons, an anxiety-ridden one, for whom a readiness to take off at the drop of a hat is baked into our DNA (a similar number of Jews, it should be recalled, were [reportedly](#) considering leaving the country if then-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn had been elected in 2019). But with the government advancing a [repressive legislative agenda](#) that is [trampling on](#) the [right to protest](#), the ceasefire marches are providing the perfect excuse to instrumentalize Jews' sense of insecurity.

Most read on +972

[‘Israel wanted a silent, perfect victim. We refused’](#) [‘A mass assassination factory’: Inside Israel’s calculated bombing of Gaza](#) [‘We scream, starve, and die alone’: Life in the ruins of Shuja’iya](#)

At the same time, imprudent headlines like those seen in major newspapers over the past week only serve to further inflame those sentiments. And with incidents of Islamophobia also [rising sharply](#) since October 7, including from the mouths of [senior politicians](#), there is a lot of work to be done to ensure that all of Britain's ethnic and racial minorities feel that their future in the country is secure.

For their part, Jewish leadership organizations, including those that monitor and campaign against antisemitism, need to reckon with the fact that what may cause offense or discomfort does not necessarily equate to an attack on one's identity. As Israel's bombardment of 2.3 million besieged Palestinians enters its sixth month with no signs of letting up, and soldiers continue [broadcasting their war crimes](#) for all the world to see, it is more important than ever that Jews and non-Jews alike can draw a clear distinction between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. The secure future of Jewish communities, in the U.K. and beyond, may depend on it.

Ben Reiff

P.S.

• +972 Magazine. March 13, 2024:

<https://www.972mag.com/uk-antisemitism-british-jews-london/>

• Ben Reiff is an editor at +972 Magazine and Vashti Media. Twitter: @bentreyf.

• Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

[BECOME A +972 MEMBER TODAY](#)