

Understanding Antisemitism and Islamophobia in the context of Israel and Palestine

A UNISON and
HOPE not hate
briefing for activists



The events in Israel and Palestine since 7 October have shocked us all. Thousands of Israeli and Palestinian civilians have been killed, communities traumatised and a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Gaza. UNISON has responded by calling for an immediate ceasefire, full access to humanitarian assistance, the release of hostages and talks leading to a viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

It is a sad reality that whenever there is an escalation in violence in Israel and Palestine there is an increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia in the UK. The struggle against racism is deeply embedded in UNISON's values, and many within our union are proud to identify as anti-racist and anti-fascist. However, we must not be naive to the fact that we can still engage in racism, even if doing so unintentionally.

This guidance has been produced with Hope not Hate to help activists better understand how racism manifests in the context of the current conflict. We all have a responsibility to tackle the unprecedented increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia we have seen in recent months. Education is the first stage on that journey. I hope this guide helps to increase our understanding and awareness, so we are better able to confront and avoid antisemitism and Islamophobia in our union and communities.

Christina McAnea, General Secretary, UNISON

For the last 20 years HOPE not hate has worked to fight prejudice and discrimination in Britain. Sadly, we know that whenever there is conflict in the Middle East we see a rise in prejudice, discrimination and hate crime on the streets of Britain. At times of heightened emotions, when people are understandably angry at the suffering they are witnessing abroad, there is a danger that people begin to hold whole communities in the UK responsible for the actions of foreign governments or people of the same religion. We must not let legitimate campaigning for justice and peace abroad become an excuse or cause of racism at home.

HOPE not hate is a longstanding part of the Labour Movement and has always worked closely with trade unions. UNISON in particular has been an invaluable supporter of our work and we are proud to have campaigned alongside countless UNISON members against the far right and discrimination over many years. The trade union movement has always been at the forefront of education and campaigns against racism and we hope that this guide can contribute to the already excellent education work that your union does.

Nick Lowles, CEO, HOPE not hate

Introduction

Since the start of the recent conflict in the Middle East millions of people in Britain have been moved to protest and campaign against the kidnapping, imprisonment, torture and death of innocent civilians, whether at the hands of Hamas or the Israeli government. Speaking out against injustice is part of what makes us trade unionists.

However, sadly, there have been examples when people have crossed a line and gone beyond legitimate criticism and campaigning and engaged in either antisemitism or islamophobia. **The simplest way to avoid slipping into racism when discussing the ongoing conflict is to never hold British Jews or Muslims collectively responsible for the actions of either the Israeli Government or Hamas.**

This guide is designed to help people avoid racism, whether conscious or unconscious, when discussing the current war. It explains the mistakes that some people are making and is designed to ensure that people better understand how to avoid engaging in either antisemitism or islamophobia.

Racism can never be excused and educating ourselves as a movement is the best way to avoid it.

Antisemitism

During the current conflict, a minority on the left and within the union movement have crossed the line from legitimate criticism of the actions of the Israeli government into antisemitism.

While a tiny number are being knowingly and overtly antisemitic, many more are slipping into prejudice and discrimination by mistake, ignorantly regurgitating longstanding forms of antisemitism or turning a blind eye and denying such charges as a smear.

The process of education is central to the battle against antisemitism within the Labour Movement. By better understanding what antisemitism is, it can be avoided.

Below are some examples of the ways that antisemitism has been displayed during the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. While there can be significant crossover between the various categories, this is a useful framework from which we can better understand and address the problem of antisemitism within our movement.

Outright Extremism

Sadly, while rare, within the union movement there are individuals who are consciously antisemitic.

At the most extreme end is a very small group who engage in violent or pro-genocide antisemitism, or outright Holocaust denial or revisionism. While there are certainly a handful of individuals who identify as left wing who display this extreme form of antisemitism, it is by no means commonplace and remains far more common on the extreme far right of the political system.

Conspiracy Theorists

Much more common are those who engage in conspiratorial antisemitism and use antisemitic tropes, especially in relation to supposed Jewish power and influence.

This form of antisemitism is often tied to anti-elite sentiment, opposition to 'globalists' and anti-capitalist politics, often with special reference to conspiracy theories around the Rothschild family or George Soros.

The idea that Jewish people have undue influence on world politics and a secret agenda is an age-old trope. It is often promoted by claiming that Jewish people dominate

in bank ownership and the media, or that Jewish people have deep and sinister political connections.

The most common trope regarding undue influence propagated by left-wing antisemites is the suggestion that the “Zionist lobby”, “Israel lobby” or even Mossad are somehow steering UK domestic politics to such an extent that political leaders cannot be trusted. Words such as “Puppet masters” are also often used to describe these foreign powers. Doing this is antisemitic and must be avoided.

Specifically related to Israel

A recurring discourse is the implicit or explicit blaming of Jewish people as a group for the policies of the Israeli state, whether or not they are citizens of Israel. This includes those who use the term ‘Zionism’ solely to abuse Jewish people, rather than a descriptor of a broad and varied political, cultural, social and/or religious ideology.

There is a line between legitimate criticism of the Israeli state, in line with criticism of any other government, and antisemitism. Strong feelings for the plight of Palestinians in some cases take the arguments over that line. In extreme cases, it leads to the equation of Israel or Zionism with Nazism which many Jewish people find deeply painful and offensive.

The assumption by some that Jewish people are automatically supportive of the State of Israel’s actions against Palestinians can lead to a lack of sympathy for Jews in Britain, or even blame for the actions of a foreign government. The fight against antisemitism is therefore viewed by some as conflicting with anti-imperialism and other anti-racist struggles, primarily that of Islamophobia.

Importantly, merely swapping the word ‘Jew’ for ‘Israel’ or ‘Zionism’ doesn’t automatically stop something from being antisemitic.

‘Real Antisemitism’

Elements of the left have created a definition of antisemitism so narrow that they do not fall into it themselves. This has allowed these elements to become complacent in the fight against racism and other forms of discrimination, removing the need to engage with and listen to impacted communities.

While most accept that racism can take a range of forms, including structural or conspiratorial, for some ‘real antisemitism’ is confined to explicit Jew hatred and racist epithets. Any broader notions of what antisemitism is that include, for example, equating British Jews with Nazis because of the actions of the Israeli government, are not deemed ‘real antisemitism’.

This narrow definition of antisemitism often sits upon a perception of Jews as different to other ethnic minorities, meaning that all too often Jews and antisemitism are treated differently to other minority communities and other forms of racism. Influenced by antisemitic tropes about Jewish power and wealth and the ancient notion of Jewish disloyalty to their countries, some homogenise the global Jewish community as an ‘elite’ or an ‘oppressor’, meaning that for some on the left, attacking Jews is seen as “punching up”. This issue is exacerbated by the incorrect assertion that “all Jews are white.”

Together this means that some within our movement believe that the Jewish community is generally or even universally wealthy, and as such are not considered ‘victims’ of racism and prejudice in the same way that other minority groups, because they are believed to be ‘powerful’ enough to look after themselves.

Islamophobia

Just as with antisemitism, the major issue during the ongoing conflict is people holding all Muslims responsible for the actions of terrorist groups such as Hamas or trying to suggest that the actions of Islamist extremists are reflective of all Muslims.

Islamophobia is one of the most prevalent prejudices in Britain, meaning that unfortunately there will be members in our union that hold prejudiced and discriminatory views towards Muslims. During the current war there is a danger that this underlying prejudice is exacerbated.

Common Arguments

The battle against Islamophobia and anti-Muslim prejudice is complicated by the refusal of some to even admit the existence of Islamophobia, or the terminology that can be used to describe it.

Objections such as “it’s not Islamophobia, it’s Islamo-realism”, “I don’t hate Muslims, I hate Islam”, “Muslims are not a race so it’s not racism” and “we should be able to criticise religions” are regular refrains, often used to excuse intolerance, bigotry and hate towards followers of Islam or to divert the conversation away from the issue onto a debate about the validity of the word “Islamophobia” itself.

Islamophobia is real. Quibbling over the term distracts from the issue. Countering Islamophobia is not about curtailing free speech or limiting criticism of the faith either. It is about ensuring a minority community is not stigmatised, discriminated against, or subject to hate crimes.

Muslims are not the only ones who are targeted by this hate either. South Asian citizens of other religions and none in the UK have sometimes been identified or targeted as ‘Muslims’, no matter the supposed distinction between race and religion.

Terrorists

One of the most common attacks that Muslims have faced during the current conflict is that “Muslims are terrorists”.

While it is right to call Hamas terrorists, the idea that all Muslims support Hamas or have sympathies towards terrorism is racist. This is something that many Muslims and non-Muslims of Asian heritage face whenever there is a terrorist attack or war in the Middle East.

Some argue that Hamas and other Islamist terrorist organisation are representative of Islam and that Islam is an inherently supremacist religion.

Central here is the idea that Muslims are uniquely violent or that their religion inherently encourages it. One of the more common ways this presents is people demanding Muslims apologise or condemn violence carried out by other Muslims to which they have no connection.

This can lead to some Muslims being worried about wearing Islamic clothing or showing solidarity for Palestine for fear of being branded as an extremist.

Muslims, like every other religious group, are comprised of a wide array of opinions and polling consistently shows that the vast majority of British Muslims reject extremism and are concerned about the same bread and butter issues as everyone else in society.

Incompatible

A common Islamophobic trope is the idea that Islam and Muslims are incompatible with Britain. It is all too common for people to argue that Muslims are somehow “a threat to the British way of life” and that Islamist terrorists reflect a widespread hostility to Britain amongst the Muslim community.

Despite the fact that many Muslim in the UK are British they often face the charge that they are a ‘threat’ to the UK or ‘don’t want to integrate’. At its extreme this can be framed as all Muslim’s engaging in ‘stealth jihad’ or are engaging in a secret but conscious effort to ‘conquer’ the UK.

One of the more prominent Islamophobic tropes to take hold within the left is that ‘all Muslims’ are misogynist, homophobic or engage in cruelty to animals.

In addition to facing Islamophobia, many Muslims will experience other forms of racism based on their ethnicity as well as their religion. This can be manifested as accusing Muslims of being “savages”, inherently violent or uncivilised.

Antisemitic Hate Crime

In the 47 days inclusive between the Hamas terror attack on Israel (Saturday 7 October) and Wednesday 22 November, Community Security Trust recorded at least 1563 antisemitic incidents across the UK. This is the highest ever total reported to CST across a 47 day period. CST has been recording antisemitic incidents since 1984.

Islamophobic Hate Crime

Tell MAMA recorded 895 anti-Muslim cases in the six weeks that followed Hamas’s deadly terror attacks. Their latest figures cover October 7 to November 19, demonstrating a six-fold increase in cases from the 2022 figure of 142 cases (110 offline, 32 online).

Next steps

The TUC have produced this interactive guide on tackling antisemitism in the workplace:

[Talking about antisemitism \(elucidat.com\)](https://www.tuc.org.uk/resources/antisemitism)

This guide produced by UNISON, explains the union’s policy on Palestine and Israel and how to campaign on the issue from a public service trade union perspective:

<https://www.UNISON.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/12/Talking-about-Palestinian-rights.pdf>