

After Corbyn, Israel Lobby Turns Its Guns on UK Academia

The Jewish Chronicle warns that the dismissal of Prof David Miller is 'just the beginning'

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The Israel lobby appears to be readying for a campaign to root out leftwing academics in the UK critical of Israel's continuing oppression of the Palestinian people – echoing its efforts against the previous leader of Britain's Labour party, Jeremy Corbyn.

As with the attacks on Corbyn, the assault on academia is being led by the Jewish Chronicle, a UK weekly newspaper that speaks for the most ardent supporters of Israel among the UK's Jewish community.

The move follows the lobby's success this month in pressuring Bristol university to sack one of its professors, David Miller, even after the university's own investigation – headed by a senior lawyer – [concluded](#) that claims of antisemitism against Miller were unfounded.

Miller was formally [dismissed](#) on the unexplained basis that he "did not meet the standards of behaviour we expect from our staff and the University".

The lobby has struggled to disguise its glee that, apparently fearful of bad publicity, Bristol university capitulated to a campaign of unsubstantiated claims Miller "harassed" Jewish students.

A sociologist, Miller had been at the forefront of [research](#) into the sources of Islamophobia in the UK. His work includes a detailed examination of the Israel lobby's role in fomenting racism towards Muslims, Arabs and Palestinians.

2. The CST claim this slide showed 'mainstream UK Jewish orgs & individuals in a network under "Israel government". In context of a lecture about Islamophobia this echoes conspiracy & dual loyalty tropes' pic.twitter.com/CHdiRKNCyO

Israel has long promoted the idea that it is a bulwark against supposed Islamic savagery and terrorism, in what it and its supporters have presented as a “[clash of civilisations](#)”.

More than a century ago, Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism, argued in the colonial language of the time that a Jewish state in the Middle East would [serve](#) as “a wall of defence for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism”.

This was a key argument the Zionist movement used to lobby the great powers of the day, chiefly Britain, to help [remove](#) the native Palestinian people from much of their homeland so that a self-declared Jewish state of Israel could be established instead.

To this day Israel encourages the view both that it is under permanent existential threat from a supposedly irrational hatred and bigotry from Muslims and that it plays a critical, first-line role defending western values. As a consequence, the Palestinians have found themselves diplomatically isolated.

‘Tip of the iceberg’

Signalling the likely direction in which the lobby intends to head next, the Jewish Chronicle published an [editorial](#) this month headlined “Miller’s sacking should be the beginning, not the end”. It concluded: “Miller is not some lone voice but representative of a school of thought embedded in almost every part of academia.”

At the same time, under the headline “Miller is gone but he is only tip of the iceberg” its news pages [reported](#) that scholars in “74 separate British higher education bodies” had signed a letter of support for Miller earlier in the year, revealing “the extent of the network backing him at universities across the United Kingdom”.

Those signatories included, it noted, “a significant number representing Russell Group establishments, some of the UK’s most prestigious higher education institutions”.

The Chronicle highlighted the fact that 13 of the signatories were from Bristol university, and identified several academics by name.

The barely veiled implication is that there is an antisemitism crisis in British universities, which is being tolerated by senior staff.

The lobby used the same argument with Corbyn, claiming, despite a dearth of evidence, that he and his inner circle were indulging a supposed explosion of antisemitism within the party – with the strong implication that they were encouraging it.

The lobby’s claims were eagerly amplified by the billionaire-owned media and by a rightwing Labour party bureaucracy [deeply hostile](#) to Corbyn’s socialism.

Playbook revived

Over the past three years, the Chronicle has had an astounding number of [rulings](#) against it from the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), the newspaper industry’s feeble, self-appointed “press regulator”.

My latest: The Jewish Chronicle has lost four libel cases and broken the editor's code 28 times in three years. Yet it's faced no sanctions from the press 'regulator' because those deceptions lay at the heart of the establishment campaign against Corbyn <https://t.co/FCBP61NLRp>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [September 2, 2021](#)

Most of those misrepresentations relate to the earlier campaign against Corbyn that the Jewish Chronicle played a central role in advancing. It regularly claimed that there was a plague of antisemitism on Britain's political left.

In fact, the Chronicle appears to be reviving the playbook it and the rest of the pro-Israel lobby used against Corbyn – an outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights – that saw him and large numbers of Labour members smeared as antisemites.

Famously, the Chronicle and two other Jewish community newspapers shared a [front-page editorial](#) in summer 2018 claiming that Corbyn posed an “existential threat” to Jewish life in the UK.

This is the single most astonishing front page we've run at [@JewishChron](#) in my decade here. It is totally without precedent. Our paper has been published since 1841. [@JewishNewsUK](#) and [@JewishTelegraph](#) are our rivals – in name, in business, and on stories pic.twitter.com/peRUPRnqIX

— Marcus Dysch (@MarcusDysch) [July 25, 2018](#)

The editorial was published in the wake of a general election the previous year in which Corbyn fell short by only a few thousand votes from winning a majority of seats in the British parliament. With the ruling Conservative party mired in permanent crisis at that point, it looked like a rerun election was imminent.

The stakes for the lobby were high. Had he won, Corbyn looked like he might be the first leader of a major European state to recognise Palestinian statehood and impose sanctions on Israel – including a [ban on arms sales](#) – of the kind used against apartheid South Africa.

Keir Starmer, Corbyn's successor, has been [waging a war](#) on the party's leftwing, again using antisemitism as the pretext, cheered on by the Chronicle and others.

The paper's misrepresentations of the Labour party – which repeatedly fell foul of press regulator IPSO – are now being pressed into service against academia.

The Jewish Chronicle's two-step manoeuvre in the Miller case is familiar.

First it has suggested that the professor lost his job because the university concluded that his actions were antisemitic – when, in fact, all indications are that its investigation found in Miller's favour.

And second, the paper has strongly implied that the more than 200 scholars who [signed a letter](#) to Bristol expressing concerns about Bristol's investigation of Miller share his

supposedly antisemitic views.

Placating the lobby

Just as the Chronicle sought to create the impression of a plague of antisemitism in the Labour party under Corbyn, despite the lack of any evidence, it now hopes to suggest that antisemitism is rampant in British universities.

In fact, even those who signed the letter do not necessarily share Miller's views about Israel or its role in fomenting Islamophobia. The letter chiefly defends the principle of academic freedom and Miller's right to pursue his research wherever it leads him, without fear of losing his job. No one signing it has to agree with all of his findings or everything he has said.

What is truly shocking is that more academics have not come to his defence – especially given the fact that the allegations against him made by the Israel lobby were discounted by Bristol university's own investigation.

Corbyn and his inner circle chose a similar course of action to Bristol's, seeking to placate the lobby. But Corbyn's office found every concession they made to the antisemitism smears only fuelled the lobby's belief that its intimidation campaign was working and that the net could be widened further.

Soon the lobby was not only claiming that widespread support on the Labour left for the Palestinian struggle against Israel's decades of belligerent occupation was antisemitic, but that anyone who denied that it was proof of antisemitism was also outing themselves as an antisemite.

As with its attacks on Corbyn, the Chronicle's claims against Miller are hyperbolic, with the paper reporting uncritically that members of the Union of Jewish Students at Bristol had accused the professor of "harassment, targeting, and vicious diatribe".

In fact, this supposed "harassment" refers either to a lecture about propaganda by Miller, based on his research, that cited the Israel lobby's promotion of Islamophobia, or to critical comments he made about Zionism and the Israel lobby in forums outside the classroom.

Miller did not harass anyone. Rather, those who identify as Zionists – for whom Israel is an abiding political priority – have chosen to take offence at his findings. They have not been bullied, intimidated or threatened, as the Chronicle implies. Their political beliefs about Israel have been challenged by Miller's academic work.

Notably, Miller's research also shows that conservative movements like the ruling party in the UK have played a central role in promoting Islamophobia, as several key figures in Britain's Conservative party such as Baroness Sayeeda Warsi have repeatedly [warned](#).

Breaking news –

Another dossier of Islamophobia within [@Conservatives](#) consisting of 25 current and former Councillors is presented to my Party today
Disgraceful that denial and lack of an enquiry has meant others are left to collate and present evidence <https://t.co/0xfpN7BQOR>

— Sayeeda Warsi (@SayeedaWarsi) [November 12, 2019](#)

But would Bristol have seriously investigated claims by Conservative party students, for example, that they were being “harassed” by Miller for presenting his research in class or his speaking at political events outside the classroom? Would the university have considered sacking him based on those claims?

The question does not even need posing. The political nature of the complaints – and their threat to academic freedom – would have been instantly obvious to everyone.

And therein lies the Israel lobby’s special usefulness to the establishment. The lobby’s own highly partisan, politicised campaigns against the left can – perversely but all too often effectively – be disguised as anti-racism or the promotion of human rights.

Mounting scrutiny

But, as the Chronicle implicitly recognises in its call for the targeting of a much wider circle of British academics, ardent Zionists are facing a much bigger challenge than a single political leader or a single professor.

They feel personally affronted as their political passion project, Israel, comes under mounting scrutiny. Like the Chronicle, Zionists hope to reverse various political developments over the past decade or two that have made it much harder for them to publicly defend Israel.

Those developments include:

- The success of Palestinian civil society’s calls since the mid-2000s for an international boycott of Israel to end its oppression of Palestinians;
- The horrifying images of Israel’s repeated military assaults on a Palestinian population in Gaza besieged by Israel for 15 years, living in what has become effectively an overcrowded, open-air prison;
- Israel’s sabotaging of a two-state solution offered by the Palestinian leadership by illegally building ever more settlements on Palestinian land, while also rejecting the alternative of a single state guaranteeing equal rights for Jews and Palestinians in the region;
- and recent reports, from Israeli and international human rights groups, clearly making the case that Israel qualifies as an [apartheid state](#).

The Chronicle and the ardent Zionists in the UK it speaks for feared that Corbyn represented the moment when this view of Israel broke into the political mainstream.

And now they fear that, unless drastic action can be taken, scholars like Miller will introduce a more clear-eyed discourse in academia about Israel, exposing the lobby for the anti-Palestinian racists they are.

Financial penalties

Under threat of financial penalties from Johnson’s rightwing government, dozens of British universities have been [pressured](#) to adopt a new definition of antisemitism.

This was the prize the lobby sought against Corbyn. He was forced to accept not just the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s [imprecise definition](#) of Jew hatred but also 11 [appended examples](#), most of which openly conflate strenuous criticism of Israel with

antisemitism. The lobby has argued that any denial that these examples amount to antisemitism is also a form of antisemitism.

In detailing how Israel is an apartheid state in recent reports, both the New York-based Human Rights Watch and B'Tselem, Israel's most respected human rights organisation, would have fallen foul of the IHRA's claim that it is antisemitic to describe Israel as "a racist endeavour".

Similarly, large numbers of Israeli scholars – and almost all Palestinians and their supporters – would breach the example against requiring of Israel "behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation".

They question the notion that Israel is a democratic nation. Israeli scholars have instead termed it an "[ethnocracy](#)" because it mimics a democratic state while actually according rights and privileges to one ethnic group, Jews, that it denies to another, Palestinians.

Corbyn quickly found himself trapped by the IHRA definition and its associated examples. Any meaningful support for Palestinians against Israeli oppression – including his past actions, before he became Labour leader – could be twisted into evidence of antisemitism.

And any argument that antisemitism was thereby being weaponised by the lobby could be similarly adduced as proof of antisemitism. It provided perfect conditions for a witch-hunt of the Labour left.

Now, the lobby hopes, the same conditions can banish scholarly criticism of Israel.

One of the early targets for the lobby's new campaign is likely to be the University and College Union (UCU), a higher education union representing over 120,000 academics and support staff. It has so far [held out](#) against the pressure campaign.

Its resistance appears to have galvanised some academic bodies to stand their ground too. Notably, in February the academic board of University College London [revolted](#) against the adoption of the IHRA definition by the university's governing body, calling the wording "politicised and divisive".

A report by the UCL board in December had [warned](#) that the IHRA definition conflated prejudice against Jews with political debate about Israel and Palestine. That, it said, could have "potentially deleterious effects on free speech, such as instigating a culture of fear or self-silencing on teaching or research or classroom discussion of contentious topics".

That is exactly what the Israel lobby, and its activists in the Union of Jewish Students that targeted Miller, will hope for. With their new war on academia – assisted by a rightwing government – they may be able to inflict as much damage on academic support for Palestinians as they did political support.

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This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

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Featured image: Professor David Miller (CAGE/YouTube)

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