

As Battle Rages in UK Labour Party, Moshe Machover Expelled After Asserting 'Anti-Zionism Does Not equal Anti-Semitism'

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Over the past 18 months the British Labour party has been [beset by a moral panic](#). According to pro-Israel activists in Labour, there has been a surge of anti-semitism in the party since Jeremy Corbyn became leader two years ago. Corbyn has broken with decades of party policy by placing a much stronger emphasis on the need to end Israel's oppression of the Palestinians.

As we will show, these activists' concerns are much less about anti-semitism than about Corbyn and the trend he represents. Pro-Israel groups, who have strong backing among the party establishment opposed to Corbyn, fear he is changing the nature of the British political discourse about Israel and the Palestinians. Beyond this, they are worried that should Corbyn, or someone else from his wing of the Labour party, reach power, they will put the Palestinians at the heart of a Labour government's foreign policy. Much is at stake.

A strange, if largely obscured feature of the supposed anti-semitism crisis – set out at length in my first [Mondoweiss article](#) – is that so many of those accused and convicted in Labour of this hate crime are Jews. The latest person accused by the party of anti-semitism – and this week expelled – is Moshe Machover, a mathematician and philosophy professor at the University of London. He was born and raised in Israel.

Machover appears to be among the first Labour members to be netted by a rule change on anti-semitism introduced at the party conference last week. Activists in a new group called Jewish Voice for Labour, launched at the conference, had warned that the change in wording would allow the party bureaucracy to expel members for “thought crimes”.

As previously explained, the rule change was pushed hard by a powerful pressure group in Labour called the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM), which is the sister organisation of Israel's own Labour party. The JLM helped create Labour Friends of Israel, which has traditionally been a key pro-Israel lobbying group among Labour members of parliament.

Both organisations have clandestine ties to the Israeli government through Israel's London embassy, as was revealed earlier this year by an Al Jazeera [undercover investigation](#). It secretly filmed this collusion in action, as pro-Israel Labour activists plotted to subvert Corbyn's leadership, even at the cost of irreparably damaging the party.

Professor expelled

In decrying an “anti-semitism plague” in Labour, the JLM and its supporters have claimed that they are not conflating anti-semitism with anti-Zionism. But Machover’s case clearly illustrates that they are precisely doing that.

Machover received a letter from Labour head office this week alleging that he had breached the party’s anti-semitism rules with an article ([PDF](#)), paradoxically titled “Anti-Zionism does not equal anti-Semitism”, in a publication of the Labour Party Marxists group

In it, Machover pointed out the widespread opposition of most Jews to the ideas propagated by the Zionist movement before the rise of Hitler, and the problematic ideological affinities between Zionists and anti-semites. He wrote:

“The founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, had pointed out that anti-Semitic regimes would be allies, because they wanted to get rid of the Jews, while the Zionists wanted to rid them of the Jews. That was the common interest.”

For this reason, observed Machover, quoting Zionist and Nazi leaders of the time, many Zionists welcomed the early policies of the Nazis, including even the notorious Nuremberg Laws of 1935. This was before the Nazis switched to a policy of extermination in the death camps. Both anti-semites and Zionists wanted Jews and non-Jews separated, and both rejected miscegenation. A similar argument, expressed more clumsily, led to the [suspension of Ken Livingstone](#), a former London mayor, earlier this year.

It is notable that the Labour party accused Machover of anti-semitism on the grounds that his article was likely to “cause offence to Jewish people”. It begged the question: *which Jewish people?*

That issue had, in fact, become a battleground at the conference. Jewish Labour party activists had set up a new group, Jewish Voice for Labour, to act as a countervailing force against the traditional dominance of the JLM in influencing the party’s policies towards Israel and the Palestinians and against its accusations of anti-semitism by Corbyn supporters. Jewish Voice for Labour represents a broad range of Jews who have until now been marginalised in the Labour party, including trenchant critics of the occupation, anti-Zionists and supporters of BDS, the boycott movement. For the first time they have a collective voice within the party.

As Machover [observed](#), pro-Israel groups are in trouble in Labour and elsewhere.

“They are losing credibility on the arena of what could be called international opinion, but – more importantly – they are losing the Jewish public outside Israel, especially those under 30. There is a clear generational shift in opinion. These people are becoming very critical of Israel and its colonisation project.”

Vague definitions

The letter from Labour head office also accused Machover of violating the [definition of anti-semitism](#) produced last year by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an inter-governmental body. The definition has been adopted by the Labour party, as well as the British government.

For some time, pro-Israel lobby groups in the UK and Europe have been trying to promote new, much vaguer definitions of anti-semitism that would cover strong criticism of Israel. The IHRA's is the most significant and successful. Its working definition is: "Anti-Semitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews." ([PDF](#))

As Stephen Sedley, a Jewish former British appeal court judge, [has noted](#), this raises many problems. If anti-semitism is defined as a "perception", who is qualified to do the perceiving? And if anti-semitism "may be expressed as hatred", does that not also imply, more troublingly, that it "may not be" so expressed.

In fact, the examples of anti-semitism provided by the IHRA include several that are clearly designed to include criticism of Israel:

- * Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic.
- * Applying double standards by requiring of [the state of Israel] a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- * Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g. by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour.

Any discourse that takes as its premise that Israel is not a liberal democracy, but rather a Jewish state, as it declares itself to be, or that it practises apartheid, or that it should be subject to a boycott, appears to fall foul of this definition.

A dangerous trend

Under pressure from the JLM, the National Executive Committee, Labour's ruling body, and last week's conference accepted a compromise amendment to the membership rule book. An existing clause protecting freedom of thought and speech was dropped. From now on, members can be expelled if their behaviour "might reasonably be seen to demonstrate hostility or prejudice".

The JLM, however, had tried to foist on the party a more draconian definition: that an anti-semitic incident should be "defined as something where the victim or anyone else think it was motivated by hostility or prejudice". Noticeably, the letter from Labour head office to Machover echoed this rejected definition. It objected to the use of "language that may be *perceived* as provocative, insensitive or offensive" (emphasis added).

As Labour activist Bob Pitt [observed](#), in the letter to Machover party officials rode roughshod over the new rule.

"It is not enough for someone to perceive that an incident is antisemitic and be offended by it; it is necessary for the party to establish that the perception has a reasonable basis," he wrote of the approved rule change.

Instead, officials were "apparently trying to introduce the JLM's abandoned rule change through the back door. According to [the letter], Moshé has opened himself up to

disciplinary action because he has written articles that are ‘perceived as provocative, insensitive or offensive’ by Zionists who don’t like to be reminded about embarrassing episodes from the history of Zionism.”

This process of redefining anti-semitism by the Labour party is not happening in a vacuum. Politicians and media pundits are starting to push the debate about anti-semitism in disturbing new directions more generally – and this process has accelerated since Corbyn became leader.

This dangerous trend was highlighted in a commentary last week in the midst of the conference. Jonathan Freedland, a senior columnist at the *Guardian* newspaper and the *Jewish Chronicle*, is highly influential among Britain’s liberal Zionist community. He is possibly the most prominent arbiter of “anti-semitism” on the British left.

He used his [column](#) to attack three well-known Labour figures closely identified with Corbyn who had each dismissed the “Labour’s anti-semitism plague” as mischief-making. Freedland accused former London mayor Ken Livingstone, award-winning film-maker Ken Loach, and trade union leader Len McCluskey of anti-semitism denial and leading Labour into a “dark place”.

In a circular proof of Labour’s anti-semitism crisis, Freedland cited calls from some Labour activists – in fact, a handful – to expel the JLM from the party. He avoided mentioning why: that the JLM had been caught redhanded conspiring against the party leader by the *Al Jazeera* investigation.

Freedland also noted that there were “Marxists” at the conference handing out leaflets – presumably a reference to Machover’s article – repeating Livingstone’s point about the documented negotiations between Zionists and Nazis in the early 1930s.

Orwellian ‘newspeak’

Freedland, a former winner of Britain’s Orwell Prize, then indulged in some trademark Orwellian “newspeak”. He argued that the three leading Labour lights, as non-Jews, were not in a position to assess whether there was an anti-semitism crisis in the party. Only Jews could make that call – and, he added, Labour’s Jews were adamant that the party had a big problem.

Here Freedland effectively backed the draconian and rejected definition of anti-semitism originally proposed by the JLM at the conference. According to both the JLM and Freedland, anti-semitism cannot be adduced through objective criteria, or by applying traditional definitions, such as hateful statements or actions against Jews because they are Jews.

Instead, Freedland and the JLM believe that anti-semitism can be defined far more broadly. It exists, they say, if it is perceived as such by its victims, even if no tangible evidence can be identified. It is like a mood sensed only by those – Jews – who are attuned to it through their firsthand experience of anti-semitism.

Witchfinder Freedland

Disturbing as this definition is, Freedland went further. He posited that Livingstone, Loach and McCluskey were arrogantly dismissing a Jewish consensus on the prevalence of anti-semitism in the party. But there was a deep flaw in his reasoning: the conference had just

proved that this consensus did not, in fact, exist.

The non-Jewish trio were speaking not only about their own failure to identify examples of anti-semitism in the Labour movement. As prominent figures in the party, they were also giving voice to those Jewish members whose views had long been ignored because they did not accord with those of the party's Israel lobby, the JLM.

Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, a leading member of Jewish Voice for Labour, [made precisely this point](#):

"When McCluskey and Loach say they know Labour is not a hotbed of antisemitism, they speak with the authority of Jewish comrades who have said so repeatedly, and been ignored."

Jewish Voice for Labour had been established to provide a counterweight to the JLM and give Jews critical of Israel a collective voice. Here was Freedland not only discounting their voice but failing to notice it even existed. Jews, Freedland implied, only counted when, like the JLM, they wrapped themselves in the Israeli flag.

But Freedland was still not satisfied. Like some Witchfinder General, he accused the trio not just of ignorance about the prevalence of anti-semitism in Labour, but of actually being anti-semitic themselves for claiming that the moral panic about anti-semitism had been manipulated for political ends. Freedland quoted as proof Loach's comment: "It's funny these stories [about anti-semitism] suddenly appeared when Jeremy Corbyn became leader, isn't it?"

Anti-Jewish trope?

Freedland observed, again with a satisfyingly circular logic:

"For Len [McCluskey] and the Kens [Loach and Livingstone] and their allies, it's all made up. Perhaps they don't realise that that itself is a tired anti-Jewish trope: that Jews invent stories of suffering to drive a secret political agenda. Or, to put it more simply, that there is a Jewish conspiracy."

But Livingstone, Loach and McCluskey never posited a Jewish conspiracy. That was a figment of Freedland's feverish imagination. Unlike him, they fully recognised that a significant section of Jewish opinion in the Labour party felt exactly the same way they did about the misuse of unsubstantiated anti-semitism allegations to discredit Corbyn and deflect attention from his efforts to focus the party's attention on Palestinian suffering.

What this trio and the Jewish Voice for Labour had argued instead was that a small, unrepresentative group inside Labour – a self-declared pressure group – was trying to advance the aims of the Israeli state. This was hardly a radical conclusion. After all, the JLM was doing exactly what it claims to be doing – promoting Israel's interests – while additionally seeking to conflate those interests with the supposed interests of all Jews and the Labour party.

Like all lobbies, the Israel lobby plays the cards it has in its hand to win its case. But unlike other lobbies, the Israel lobby can silence critics with a powerful threat – of tarring them as

anti-semites. Sadly, Freedland amply proved a very human truth: people who wield power, however limited, invariably end up using and abusing it to their own benefit.

Divisive identity politics

The new definition of anti-semitism that liberal Zionists, and the JLM, wish to foist on British political life is troubling indeed, and draws heavily on the most divisive kind of identity politics. It asserts that Israel and Zionism are at the core of modern Jewish identity. To criticise Israel is, therefore, to attack Jewish identity – to commit a hate crime. To be “offensive”.

If that sounds Orwellian in its implications, too bad. To dispute this claim is proof of anti-semitism too. Like the Medieval dunking of witches, you cannot win.

Here is Freedland, in [another column](#), rationalising in more detail an idea taking ground in left politics in Britain and much of the west: that Jews should be left to decide what constitutes anti-semitism:

“On the left, black people are usually allowed to define what’s racism; women can define sexism; Muslims are trusted to define Islamophobia. But when Jews call out something as anti-semitic, leftist non-Jews feel curiously entitled to tell Jews they’re wrong, that they are exaggerating or lying or using it as a decoy tactic – and to then treat them to a long lecture on what anti-Jewish racism really is.

“The left would call it misogynist ‘mansplaining’ if a man talked that way to a woman. They’d be mortified if they were caught doing that to LGBT people or Muslims. But to Jews, they feel no such restraint.”

Unrepresentative lobbies

First, it needs pointing out that plenty of British Jews, including experts on the subject like [Antony Lerman](#) and [Stephen Sedley](#), also take issue with the definition of anti-semitism employed by pro-Israel Jews, like Freedland and the JLM. They too believe it is being abused and manipulated for political ends.

These Jews have struggled to make their voices heard, not necessarily because they lack numbers but because they have not been organised in the way the Israel lobby is in much of Europe and the US. And in turn, that is largely because they lack the support, funding and organisational backing that comes from allying oneself to a powerful benefactor like the Israeli state. There is nothing unique about this. Lobbies revolve around powerful interests, as one can see spectacularly demonstrated in the United States, where unrepresentative gun, medical, financial and military lobbies dominate political life.

But in addition, the Israel lobby benefits from the oxygen of publicity offered by the state-corporate media in a way countervailing groups like Jewish Voice for Labour don’t. The corporate media failed to send a single journalist to cover the group’s establishment at the conference, despite the obvious newsworthiness of the event. And Freedland has continued to ignore the intervention by the Jewish Voice for Labour in the anti-semitism debate.

To understand this “oversight” requires a lengthy, separate analysis of the role of the western corporate media in supporting related corporate interests like the arms industry,

and of the readiness of European political and media elites to submit to the so-called “Washington consensus” – whatever the US state decides are its core interests.

Once these issues are factored in, Freedland’s argument becomes entirely self-fulfilling. The definitions we hear from organised Jewish groups conflate anti-semitism with anti-Zionism precisely because they support Israel’s interests and those of its western patrons.

Victim becomes oppressor

But there is an even more profound flaw in Freedland’s thesis.

Black people, women and gays are groups whose views should be listened to sensitively and considered seriously by oppressor groups, precisely because the oppressor is still in a position to oppress. It is not that white people’s views of racism are worthless; it is that their position of privilege makes it extremely hard for them to consider fully what it is like to suffer a particular form of racism and discrimination, or what it means to be a victim.

But Freedland and the JLM’s views of anti-semitism do not fit neatly into this model of victim-oppressor. When the JLM ties its Jewish identity to Israel – a state that privileges one ethnic group, Jews, over native Palestinians; that was built on the dispersion and ethnic cleansing of that native people; and continues to oppress them through a brutal military occupation – it precisely subverts the notion of Jew as victim.

In fact, it can be argued that this is the very appeal of Israel to Zionist Jews like Freedland and the JLM. They enjoy at a distance the empowerment provided by Israel. This is the excitement, described at length by liberal Israeli professor Yaron Ezrahi in his book [Rubber Bullets](#), of the Jew who is transformed by Israel into a warrior. It is the reason many Zionist Jews are publicly thrilled by the sight of Israeli soldiers, “his and her” weapons casually slung over their shoulders.

Implicated in oppression

But in the case of Jews living outside Israel, this self-image of power, the ability to inflict violence, is more complex. Israel offers Freedland and the JLM a strangely privileged status of oppressor by proxy: they demand a collective identification with a nuclear-armed, highly militarised state while still demanding the right to claim personal victimhood.

But Zionist Jews, those who identify their Jewishness with Israel, have compromised that right in relation to Israel. They cannot straightforwardly define themselves as victims precisely because they have chosen to implicate themselves in the oppression of Palestinians.

Palestinians have almost no visibility in western debates about victimhood. Even acknowledgment of Islamophobia covers only a few of the problems they face in the diaspora – of their possible denial of entry at airports, of the insults and discrimination they face as Arabs and Muslims in western societies. But it does not address their victimhood as Palestinians, their oppression at the hands of Israel, the complicity of powerful states in the west, and the decades of silence and inaction from liberal Zionists and organised Jewish groups like the JLM.

When real leftists, Jewish or not, speak in solidarity with Palestinians, and reject Jewish privilege in relation to Israel, it is not evidence of anti-semitism. It is part of their

responsibility to lobby on behalf of a highly victimised group. A group that unlike blacks, women and gays has almost no formal status in western debates about oppression.

When the Palestinians gain even a little visibility, it is chiefly because of the actions of grassroots activists promoting initiatives like Israel Apartheid Week and the BDS movement. When Freedland and the JLM reject these initiatives as evidence of anti-semitism, they choose to speak in the loud voice of Jewish privilege, not the quieter voice of Jewish victimhood.

The real racism problem

The real racism problem in the Labour party, and more generally in western societies, is not currently anti-semitism. It is a profound racism against Arabs and Muslims generally and against Palestinians in particular – a legacy of recent western colonialism, and of anti-semitism in a much broader sense that refers to all semitic peoples, not just Jews.

It is a racism that defers indefinitely a remedy for the Palestinians whose land was stolen from them by British colonialists who had no right to transfer it to someone else. It is a racism that confers legitimacy on a Jewish state, even as it boasts of its tribalism in marginalising a fifth of its own citizens because they are non-Jews. It is a racism that claims to champion a two-state solution while preferring not to lift a finger to realise it. Further, it is a racism that smears as anti-semites those whose consciences drive them to fight for Palestinian rights.

What is changing in the British Labour party is a growing acknowledgment of this among ordinary members, including an ever larger number of Jewish party activists. The consensus that the JLM and Jonathan Freedland helped to manufacture among left and liberal British Jews is slowly evaporating. Social media – and the instant window it provides on the brutality of life under Israeli occupation – is exposing these purveyors of misinformation for what they are, even as they howl “fake news”. Their time is going, and won’t likely return.

Nonetheless, these enforcers of liberal Zionist orthodoxy are not going down without a fight. And in the process they will doubtless wreak much damage on the Labour party – and further hollow out what was once the grave charge of anti-semitism. It is strategy of folly by those who may one day need the protection of both as the real anti-semites try to blaze a trail back to power.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His new website is jonathan-cook.net.

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