

# Corbyn Might Long Regret Capitulation on Anti-Semitism

The British Labour Party's decision to adopt the IHRA's contested anti-Semitism definition is a victory for the Israel lobby and for forces on both sides of the Atlantic seeking to stifle criticism of Mideast policy, argues Daniel Lazare.

**Daniel Lazare**

*Special to Consortium News*



After months of pummeling, Jeremy Corbyn, the besieged leader of Britain's Labor Party, gave in to the Zionist lobby and adopted a fiercely contested definition of anti-Jewish hatred that Arab activists say essentially brands the Palestinian cause as anti-Semitic.

Opinion varies as to what the capitulation will mean.

Alexander Mercouris, editor of the pro-Russian website *The Duran*, wrote on Consortium News that the impact will be limited. It "will not end criticism of Israel within the Labour Party or in British society," he said. "Corbyn himself will not change his views, nor will other supporters of the Palestinian struggle ... ."

But the redoubtable freelance journalist Jonathan Cook, based in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, was more convincing two or three weeks earlier when he argued in a piece republished on Consortium News that adopting the new definition "will be a major victory both for Israel and its apologists in Britain, who have been seeking to silence all meaningful criticism of Israel, and for the British corporate media, which would dearly love to see the back of an old-school socialist Labour leader whose program threatens to loosen the 40-year stranglehold of neoliberalism on British society."

## A Victory for Israel

Cook understates the case. The decision by the party's National Executive Committee is a victory for the Israel lobby and for forces on both sides of the Atlantic seeking to stifle criticism of Mideast policy. The reason is simple. Anglo-American policy rests on unqualified support for two regional powers—Israel and Saudi Arabia—that have been granted *carte blanche* to wage war on their neighbors at any time they like. All other issues—refugees, minority rights, secularism—take a second seat next to this United States-conferred license to kill.

At a time when Western powers are cutting a swath of destruction from Libya to Yemen, there is little hope of opposing Israeli-Saudi aggression without tackling Jewish chauvinism and Wahhabist sectarianism. This requires strict neutrality with regard to ethno-religious conflicts while promoting democracy, secularism, national independence and equality.

This is elementary for “an old-school socialist” like Corbyn. But the definition that Labour has adopted tips the scales in favor of the chauvinists. Instead of charting an independent course, it subordinates the party to an endlessly bellicose foreign-policy establishment at a time when America and its allies are once again threatening war over Syria’s bid to expel U.S.-backed pro-al-Qaida forces from the northeastern province of Idlib.

The spillover will be immense in the United Kingdom and United States. In a letter to the right-wing Zionist Organization of America, Kenneth L. Marcus, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos’ chief of civil rights, announced in August that the Trump administration will use the new definition in reopening an investigation into charges that a pro-Palestinian meeting at Rutgers University in 2011 violated Jewish student rights. Unless challenged in the courts, the decision will force universities throughout the country to shut down pro-Palestinian forces of just about any stripe on the grounds that their activities are discriminatory.

Critics will wind up even more marginalized than they already are, if such a thing can be believed. Farther afield, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will gain an even freer hand in Syria and the occupied territories while the Saudis will have nothing to fear from U.S. critics as they pursue their criminal war against Yemen. The fact that the definition now carries the Labour Party’s imprimatur makes it all the more difficult to resist.

### **The Origins of the Definition**

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the group behind the new definition, is a non-governmental organization founded by former Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson in 1998 to counter Holocaust denial. While its intentions may seem honorable, its political slant was apparent from the outset when it named the relentless self-promoter Elie Wiesel as its honorary chairman.

Wiesel, who died two years ago, was a world-class hypocrite who condemned Germans for not speaking out against Hitler while making it a point never to speak out against the Jewish state. When hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets in 1982 to protest the Israeli-backed slaughter of up to 3,500 Palestinians in Lebanon’s Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, he thus declared: “I support Israel—period. I identify with Israel—period. I never attack, never

criticize Israel when I am not in Israel.”

It did not augur well for the IHRA. After the alliance developed its working definition of anti-Semitism beginning in 2003, the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, an arm of the European Union, put it up on its website in early 2005, but “without formal review.” The center’s successor, the EU-sponsored Fundamental Rights Agency then took it down in 2013. After languishing for a while longer, the definition was then resurrected by the IHRA and adopted in 2016 under pressure from the conservative Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. Still, it won formal approval from only six of the alliance’s 31 member nations.

The IHRA definition’s opening statement—“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews”—is a grammatical mess, as Antony Lerman, a senior fellow at Vienna’s Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue, observed on the British website openDemocracy. While five examples of anti-Semitism it offers are accurate, six others dealing with the Jewish state are nothing less than explosive. According to the IHRA, anti-Semitism includes:

- “Claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.”
- “Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.”
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

How is it anti-Semitic to describe Israel as a racist endeavor when leading Zionists explicitly endorsed ethnic cleansing in the years leading up to the establishment of a Jewish state? “We cannot start the Jewish state ... with half the population being Arab,” Avraham Ussishkin, the Labor Zionist in charge of the Jewish National Fund, the agency charged with buying up land exclusively for Jewish use, declared in 1938, according to Benny Morris in *The Birth of the Palestinian Problem Revisited*. “... Such a state cannot survive even half an hour.”

A JNF official named Yosef Weitz added: “There is no way but to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighboring countries, to transfer all of them, save perhaps for Bethlehem, Nazareth, and old Jerusalem. Not one village must be left, not one tribe.”

### **Is it Anti-Semitic if it’s True?**

Accusing critics of holding Israel to an unreasonably high standard is itself unreasonable. Considering the opprobrium heaped on the U.S. for its racial policies, on Britain for its colonial policies, on France for its collaborationist policies during World War II, and so forth, Israel has gotten

off lightly even though its anti-Palestinian policies are no less atrocious.

Controversial comparison with the Nazis is rhetoric with a history in Israeli politics. In 1948, Albert Einstein, Hannah Arendt, Sidney Hook, and other Jewish notables published an open letter accusing future Prime Minister Menachem Begin of heading up a political movement “closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy, and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties.”

Does this make Einstein an anti-Semite?

Sixty-odd years later, hundreds of ultra-orthodox Jews paraded about in Jerusalem wearing concentration-camp uniforms with yellow Stars of David pinned to their chest. It was their way of showing that secular Israeli politicians are no better than Nazis. Are Hasidim anti-Semitic as well?

Yehuda Bauer, the Israeli historian who serves as the IHRA’s formal academic adviser, in 2003 told a group of Danish visitors that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could conceivably end in a Mideast version of the Final Solution. “What we have here between the Israelis and the Palestinians is an armed conflict—if one side becomes stronger, there is a chance of genocide,” he said. When a visitor asked, “Am I to understand that you think Israel could commit genocide on the Palestinian people?,” Bauer replied: “Yes.”

“Just two days ago,” he went on, “extremist settlers passed out flyers to rid Arabs from this land. Ethnic cleansing results in mass killing.”

By suggesting that Israel is in danger of succumbing to Nazi methods, has the alliance’s own adviser run afoul of its own definition?

Logic like this has been brought into sharp relief in view of the Israeli government’s attitude toward resurgent anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. In Lithuania, pro-Axis prosecutors have initiated legal proceedings against aged Jewish war veterans for alleged crimes committed while serving in anti-Nazi partisan units during World War II. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s government is rehabilitating interwar leader Miklos Horthy, who helped send half a million Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in 1944. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party has made it a crime to say that Poles were complicit in the Holocaust—which, in fact, thousands were—while Ukraine is now seeing “an unprecedented new surge of anti-Semitism” thanks to the U.S.-backed government’s heavy reliance on ultra-right militias in its war against pro-Russian separatists.

How has Israel responded? With forthright denunciations? With ringing appeals to humanity? With denunciations of anti-semitism? Not quite. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu maintains close diplomatic relations with Lithuania and hails

Orban as “a true friend of Israel” because he “understand[s] that the threat of radical Islam is a real one.” He has whitewashed Poland’s role in the Holocaust, earning a rebuke from Jerusalem’s famous Yad Vashem Holocaust museum on the grounds that “existing documentation and decades of historical research yield a totally different picture.”

The Israeli government’s response to Ukraine has been to sell arms to the nation’s ultra-right Azov Battalion, whose members sport Nazi regalia and whose founder, Andryi Biletsky, once proclaimed: “The historic mission of our nation in this critical moment is to lead the white races of the world in a final crusade for their survival. A crusade against the Semite-led *Untermenschen* [a term Nazis used to describe non-Aryan people].” As a result, Azov members carry Israeli-made Tavor rifles while former Israeli army officers provide training for Ukrainian military units.

Now the Labour Party officially says it’s forbidden to suggest that Israel is in any way emulating Nazi methods. Apparently it’s not anti-Semitic unless Netanyahu says it is, and considering how well he gets along with authoritarians like Orban, his judgement is questionable.

Corbyn is a mild-mannered man who has been under relentless attacks from the party’s right-wing Blairite faction for months. Now, he’s allowed a Pandora’s box to be opened by giving in to the Zionist lobby, something he might long regret.

**Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and his articles about the Middle East, terrorism, Eastern Europe, and other topics appear regularly on such websites as *Jacobin* and *The American Conservative*.**

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