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Antisemitism-Islamophobia: Labels, Accusations, and Prejudice in the Israel-Hamas War

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

In the current Israel-Hamas war, accusations of antisemitism and Islamophobia are deployed by global advocates on each side. Such accusations are, however, often more political than substantive, though serious prejudice does exist and must be countered.

COMMENTARY

Ever since the 7 October Hamas attack in Southern Israel, and the subsequent [Israeli military response](#) in Gaza, some have taken a partisan approach. To discredit the other side, accusations of people being antisemites or Islamophobes flow into the debate. However, such [allegations can be polemical and rhetorical](#) to delegitimize the opposing side. We therefore need to look at what is entailed in such accusations.

Prejudice

Both [antisemitism and Islamophobia](#) are forms of prejudice, and our understanding builds from [Gordon Allport's pioneering work](#) in the 1950s. A prejudice consists of three main components: *stereotypes*, or intellectual and emotive representations of a group; *prejudice* as an emotive response and acceptance of these stereotypes; and, *discrimination*, which is the active component against another, harming them as an individual or a group.

While some argue about what terms to use, generally we accept that antisemitism is prejudicial hatred against Jews, and Islamophobia is prejudicial hatred against Muslims. While coined over a century apart, the former in the nineteenth and the latter in the late twentieth century, they share much in common.

Importantly, neither antisemitism nor Islamophobia, like any prejudice, is simply about personal hatred and contempt, but is also reflected in structural components within social systems, language, and worldviews.

Good Muslims, Bad Jews, and Vice Versa

Today, Jews globally are held accountable by some for the acts of the Israeli government in its war in Gaza, which have stoked mass outrage due to the mass killings of civilians caught in the crossfire, and which [some wonder how to justify morally](#), with ethical arguments [for](#) and [against](#). But many Jews are not Israelis, many Israelis (whether Jews or not) did not even vote for the current government, let alone what is now occurring. Meanwhile many Jews, Israeli and otherwise, have [sought justice for the Palestinians](#). Holding all Jews accountable for one government's military actions is antisemitism.

We have seen this [double standard also applied against Muslims](#), especially since 9/11, where to be regarded as a “good Muslim”, one was expected to actively denounce terrorism done by others claiming Muslim identity. Not to do so, was seen as making one a “bad Muslim”, i.e., suspect and potentially a terrorist sympathiser.

Both Jews and Muslims are often treated as monolithic groups, with individual agency denied, and an undue expectation – not applied to any others – that they must speak out against any violence which is otherwise held to represent them as a whole. When you don't see individuals, only groups, then this is a sign of prejudice.

Antisemitic and Islamophobic Tropes

This “[groupism](#)” ideology has seen various types of accusations levelled against both Jews and Muslims. For centuries, Europeans often spoke of “[the Jewish problems](#)”, of Jews as an unassimilable group, bound more closely to each other than non-Jewish fellow citizens, and by racial and religious inclination polluting of Western norms. Today, [the same allegations](#) often haunt Muslim populations.

The [European imaginary of Muslims](#) also, for centuries, painted them as violent and untrustworthy, reflecting centuries of imperial contestation around the Mediterranean and beyond. It also was [exported with colonialism](#) across the globe. Jews, lacking political power, did not historically face this accusation, but it surfaces today in how they are portrayed in the military actions of certain Israeli governments.

Justifiable Violence

It is hard to see Hamas' attack on 7 October as anything but a terrorist atrocity. But, for some, Israel as an occupying and belligerent force justifies such attacks. Hamas' original charter called not just for the destruction of the Israeli state, but also the killing of Jews. This latter part, which is clearly antisemitic, [was renounced](#) in 2017.

Yet the brutal killings of women, children, and the elderly suggests not a military action of freedom fighters, but an antisemitic assault in which all Jewish people are seen as complicit in the actions of the Israeli government. Those who strongly support Hamas' attack need to reckon with this deeply antisemitic aspect.

The Israeli defence minister meanwhile described Hamas as “[human animals](#)” and such dehumanising language can lead to brutal suppression when the other is seen as less than human. The vast level of civilian casualties – which at the time of writing is reported at [almost 15,000](#) and around 40 per cent of whom are children – caught in the Israeli military response implies a disregard for the lives of Palestinians. Strong defence of this war may indicate a degree of Islamophobia [in which Muslim lives are regarded as less significant](#) (notwithstanding that many Palestinians are Christians).

Zionism and Israel

The situation is complicated by discourse around Israel and Zionism. Israel, by its detractors, is often accused of [being an illegitimate state](#). However, such allegations seem to treat it by different standards. Such accusations are therefore [at least structurally antisemitic](#).

As the world’s only Jewish state, it is also understandable (especially given a millennia-old history of pogroms, ethnic cleansing, and genocide) that many Jews, even if not Israelis, feel Israel’s right to self-defence is absolute. Yet there is harsh criticism of the Israeli government [treatment of Palestinians and the settlers who take Palestinian homes](#) from many Jews, Israelis and otherwise. Indeed, the [words of some Israeli officials](#) may stoke opposition to that country’s actions. However, some supporters of Israel try and frame [any criticism of the country as antisemitic](#).

Many Jews, even if appalled at the recent military actions by the Israeli Defence Forces in Gaza, would not disavow Zionism, which at base is the belief that Jewish people have the right to a state. Yet, in the good-Jew vs bad-Jew antisemitic trope, Jews are often called on to denounce Zionism to prove they are acceptable, with accusations that militant settler violence represents all Zionism.

This is antisemitic, holding Jews to a different standard and stereotyping Jewish nationalism. But, equally, Muslims are often [called out to condemn what Hamas](#) did as if, as noted above, this is something we cannot expect of Muslims. Hence, we see similarity between antisemitic and Islamophobic tropes, and [prejudice against both is on the rise](#).

The View from Singapore

[Singapore has offered support to both](#) Israel and the Palestinian Authority over the years, and consistently called for a two-state solution. Many here may feel greater sympathy for either the Israeli state and its actions – seeing it as involved in a war on terrorism which justifies the deaths of civilians for a supposed “greater good” – while many others may see their sympathy with the underdog – especially the millions of innocent and defenceless civilians of Gaza. Wherever one’s sympathy lies, with one or both, it is important not to stigmatise and demonise the other side, which will lead to prejudice.

Good people can hold different views, which may arise from historical conditions, personal commitments of family and friends, or other factors. Seeing the other as an individual and seeking to understand them, rather than lumping them into a generic group, will allow differences to exist without disrupting social harmony or causing

personal animosity. We are all prejudiced to some degree, but we must not let those prejudices control us.

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