



קבוצת ראות
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TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'

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CONTENTS

HIGHLIGHTS	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
DEFINING ANTI-SEMITISM FROM THE LEFT	1
THE ‘MODERATE/PROGRESSIVE SPLIT AND DEMOCRATIC FOREIGN POLICY	2

HIGHLIGHTS

This paper discusses two main themes evident in discourse through the period of November 22 – December 5 that significantly relate to the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel communities in progressive arenas: the need for a definition to identify and counter strains of anti-Semitism that emanate from the progressive left; and the forms that progressive influence may assume in the Biden era.

INTRODUCTION

This product summarizes developments that affect the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel communities within the U.S. progressive left. Spanning a two-week period, November 22 – December 5, and relying solely on open-source information, the document covers events and highlights ‘weak signals’ with potential for developing significance.

This product is part of the ‘Grand Pivot of the Pro-Israel Network Project,’ for which the Reut Group received a grant the Genesis Prize as part of “Speak Out for Israel,” a global initiative in honor of 2019 Laureate Robert Kraft to combat anti-Semitism and efforts to delegitimize Israel, both of which are on the rise again in confluence with the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

DEFINING ANTI-SEMITISM FROM THE LEFT

As political and social dynamics rapidly evolve, so do contextual manifestations of hostility, prejudice, and discrimination against Jews, including when these emanate from the progressive left. This evolution generates a need to adapt definitions about what constitutes and characterizes anti-Semitism, and to achieve consensus around them. Doing so is critical for identifying the phenomenon; learning and engaging constructively about it; credibly calling out hostility, prejudice, and discrimination; and discrediting attempts to smear individuals and organizations that are calling out anti-Semitism.

In the two-week period, **the issue gained exposure through institutional and discourse focus**, widely discussed on social media; highlighted as the second JFNA policy recommendation, promoting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism, [issued](#) to the new administration; and engaged on with broader audiences, such as [here](#).

A number of examples in this period illustrate **vulnerabilities exposed in the absence of a clear way to define anti-Semitism when it emanates from the progressive left:**

- Within definitional ambiguity emerges **a struggle over who has the right to define the Jewish experience**, exemplified in the controversies sparked by a Jewish Voices for Peace panel convened on anti-Semitism [featuring](#) non-Jews and Peter Beinart, and in a [New York Times](#) piece on rejecting Hanukkah that was written by someone who does not identify as Jewish.

- The reality of a **threat of exclusion**, reflected in a [Tablet](#) piece about a Facebook group that expelled Jewish members who had tried to explain why a litmus test for a “good Jew” was anti-Semitic.
- **Definitions feed algorithms**, including those increasingly **deployed to protect against the spread of hate speech**, driven home again by the recent Facebook [announcement](#) that its algorithm will now weigh threat on the basis of the extent to which a given group faces hostility, prejudice, and discrimination. More broadly, the ability to define anti-Semitism accurately is a basis for assessing and monitoring threat levels.

Jewish communal mobilization surrounding the issue is accruing tangible results. Significantly, a long-developing struggle of Jewish and pro-Israel groups against a proposed California ethnic-studies curriculum [resulted](#) in well-received revisions, including the removal of lesson that framed the Jewish community as having “gained racial privilege.” Efforts towards promoting the IHRA definition gained a boost in the UK, with the English Premier League, the highest level of soccer in England, [adopting](#) the definition.

However, events in the two-week period also expose **obstacles on the path to clearly and consensually defining anti-Semitism including in the way it is manifesting in the progressive left today:**

- **Rejection of the idea that anti-Zionism is inherently anti-Semitic** – The most commonly attacked and vulnerable aspect of the IHRA definition (for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) and most formulations of contemporary anti-Semitism, its rejection legitimizes claims that attempts to shut down anti-Zionist rhetoric and activity constitute aggressive silencing and harassment campaigns.

Dominant existing definitions of anti-Zionism as anti-Semitism maintain significant areas of subjectivity, generally focusing on anti-Zionism that takes forms of ‘singling out’ Israel (for example, by positing that only Jews among the world’s people that seek or have a state do not deserve the right to self-determination; or by holding up Israel to different standards than others), or of demonizing Israel (for example, by comparing the Israeli government to a Nazi regime, or accusing the IDF of atrocities). More tangible criteria to parsing anti-Semitic anti-Zionism may include characterizing anti-Semitic anti-Zionism: as undermining Israel’s right to exist by calling for or promoting the destruction of the state, on the basis of its demonization and by singling it out among nations as deserving of destruction; and by prejudice or discrimination against Jews related to their presumed or actual association with, defense of, or support for the Jewish state.

- **Underlying Jewish communal tensions on Jewish identity**, such as between emerging from perspectives framed by Jewish particularism, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Jewish story and societal trajectory; in contrast to adherence to dominant conceptual categories that categorize binarily, primarily based on skin color or socio-economic privilege. This tension has come to a fore recently around [comparing](#) other experiences of oppression and persecution to the Holocaust.

THE ‘MODERATE/PROGRESSIVE’ SPLIT AND DEMOCRATIC FOREIGN POLICY

Discourse significantly frames a struggle between moderate and progressive wings as the defining Democratic Party dynamic. The tension has been [playing](#) out in the post-election period in blame-games over Democrats’ down-ballot struggles, and in influence games taking place within the Biden administration taking shape and in Congress. **In some instances, it plays out on issues that significantly affect Jewish and pro-Israel communities.** Recently:

- **Incremental v. radical change:** In election post-mortems, prominent moderates have attributed weak Democratic performance to radical progressive messages that call for fundamental dismantlement of existing systems, such as defund the police (see [here](#) and [here](#), for example). Most recently, President Obama’s [reference](#) to ‘defund the police’ as an alienating slogan ushered in a [wave](#) of progressive criticism (including from ‘the Squad,’ see for example [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Radical change models present challenges for Jewish and pro-Israel communities, first because a stake in the status quo is rooted in the relative security and prosperity that Jewish and pro-Israel communities have achieved. Moreover, when mistrust of institutions abounds and threatens to turn into demonization, Jews – given dominant associations of Jewish power – are vulnerable to being framed as obstacles to social justice.

- **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s prominence as a progressive issue:** for example, positions on Israel figured prominently in the race between Joaquin Castro and Gregory Meeks for leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee – a race frequently framed as a battle between progressives and centrists. In this context, a [Washington Post](#) opinion piece promoting Castro as a more relevant progressive voice especially noted Castro’s “novel suggestion” that the House Foreign Affairs Committee hear also from Palestinian voices.

Notably, solidly pro-Israel Democratic Party centrists ultimately [defeated](#) progressive candidates as the chairs of both the key House Foreign Affairs and Appropriations committees. Moreover, with a few [exceptions](#), a broad Jewish consensus embraced many of Biden’s initial administration picks, noting in particular the at least five Jews chosen to serve in top positions.

- With the window for influencing Biden’s Cabinet selections closing, **some progressives plan to shift the focus to [influencing](#) policy, including foreign policy.**

In this context, the **recent Secretary of State Pompeo [announcement](#) that the State Department will regard BDS campaigns as anti-Semitic has subsequently put the issue of what constitutes anti-Semitism focally on the line in the policy arena**, and vulnerable to exploitation as a partisan wedge issue and within the Democratic Party. Pompeo also promised to cut federal funding for organizations supporting the BDS campaign.

The stakes are high, and speculation abounds regarding whether Biden will maintain the Pompeo approach (see Rashida Tlaib preemptively [taking up](#) the battle; also, in parallel promoting, and later [reversing](#), anti-Zionist content). If strains of anti-Semitic anti-Zionism are rejected within the Democratic Party and by its leadership, the credibility of the rejection gains validity and robustness.

In the absence of a clear and consensual definition on anti-Semitism as it manifests on the progressive left, **leading progressive voices may increasingly portray the policy as an obstruction of justice justified by false charges of anti-Semitism**, and indeed it has been condemned by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the ACLU. Highlighting grassroots support for this condemnation, a recent [Time](#) article that is largely flattering to the BDS Movement cites 2019 polling finding the 48 percent of Democrats supported the BDS movement, and a November 2020 J Street poll finding that almost quarter of American Jews under 40 support the boycott of products made in Israel.

The End.