

How conflict in Israel and Gaza affects Jews in the UK, and what you can do about it

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/ Introduction

The vast majority of Jews around the world are reeling from the news from Israel. The events of October 7 and the following few days constitute Israel's 9/11, Bataclan or even Pearl Harbour moment – more generally, it is yet another example of extraordinary barbarity inflicted upon innocent civilians by Islamist terrorists on an almost unfathomable scale. And when so many people are murdered, abducted or injured in a population the size of Israel, it seems that almost everyone, both in Israel and across the Jewish Diaspora, knows someone who has been affected. The degrees of separation are very close – among Jews in the UK, 71% have family living in Israel.¹

The moral repugnance of Hamas's actions ought to be crystal clear. Whatever the rights or wrongs of a political cause, murdering civilians in cold blood, abducting children and the elderly, parading raped and beaten half-naked women through the streets to the jubilant cheers of onlookers, is utterly abhorrent and should not be tolerated or justified in any way whatsoever.

The scale and nature of the brutality is devastating. Professor Alan Johnson, writing in the journal *Fathom* even before the worst excesses became apparent, described it as follows:²

“What just happened in Israel was an antisemitic pogrom. The Islamist Hamas hunted Jews in southern Israel, burning them out of their houses, shooting, killing, and abducting men, women and children. Hamas moved through towns and villages, slaughtering. At least 250 people were massacred at a music festival for peace, the executions carrying on for hours. One victim was paraded semi-naked in the back of a Hamas pick-up truck as militants sat on top of her and jeered. She was identified as a German citizen, Shani Louk, 30. Other murdered women were stripped naked and paraded through the streets with cheering men crowding round to spit on them. An elderly woman, a Holocaust survivor, was dragged away by a Hamas terrorist in her wheelchair. A Thai worker was hacked to death on camera. A terrified little Israeli boy shook as he was abused, knocked about and paraded before the cameras by his captors. Children were kidnapped. Canadian peace activists were abducted. Entire families were taken. One such was the family of Shiri and her two babies – Kfir (9 months) and Ariel (age 3) – kidnapped from their home, along with her husband, Yarden, and her parents, Yossi and Margit.”

And yet, many people choose to justify this brutality. They use a range of arguments, from the behavioural (if 'you' brutalise Palestinians, 'you' should expect to be brutalised in response), through the ideological ('you' are colonialists who have stolen the land from its indigenous people, and have no right to be there at all), to the theocratic and genocidal (all of Palestine should be turned into an Islamic State; Jews deserve to be murdered for their historic rejection of Islam).

¹ Source: JPR Research Panel, wave 4 survey, conducted April-May 2023 (n=3,759). Unpublished data.

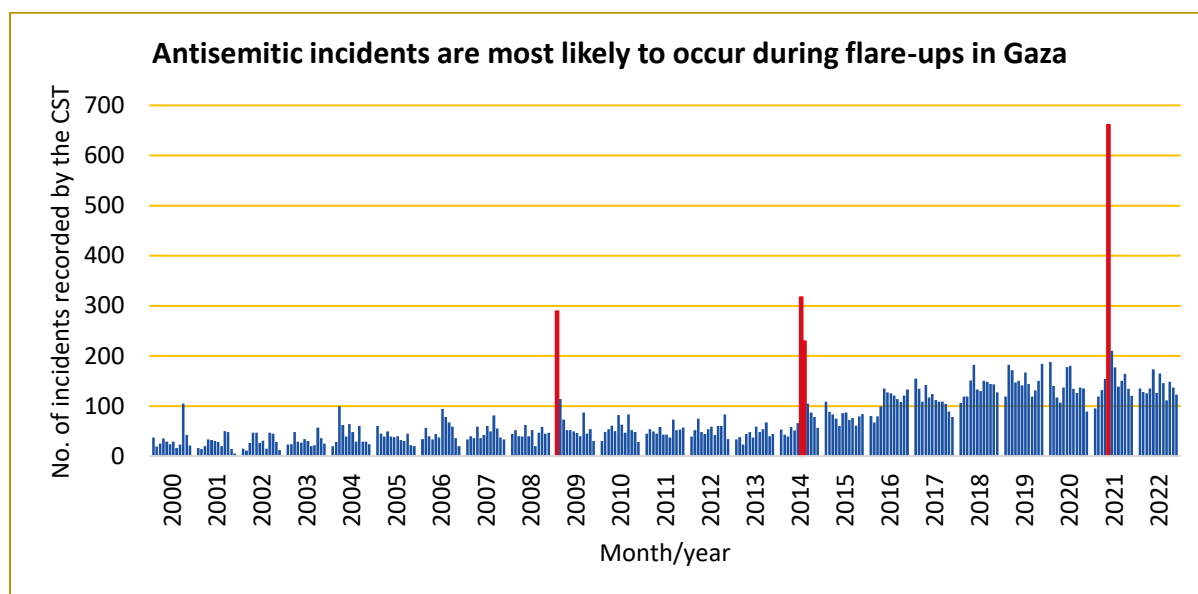
² See: Alan Johnson, 'Progressives and the Hamas Pogrom: An A-Z Guide,' *Fathom*, October 2023.

<https://fathomjournal.org/progressives-and-the-hamas-pogrom-an-a-z-guide/?fbclid=IwAR2mLiqPh-HBJfYPrOA5AJdlqCCd3rYsQeEBT3KrG0AuOPK1PdH6NvdsZxk>.

This paper does not seek to engage in debate about these types of contentions – there is a litany of such material elsewhere. It focuses instead on how these events and the discourse and reporting about them impact Jews in the UK and, by extension, other parts of the world. But in that context, it is worth noting that the common thread in all such arguments is an incomplete or flawed understanding of the Jewish narrative; a moral and intellectual failure to understand who Jews are, and the nature and legitimacy of their deep connections to the strip of land on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. The arguments are hurtful in part because, on an issue that is so profoundly personal to many Jews, they commonly fail to see or comprehend Jews, Judaism or Jewish history. Yet this is not simply an issue of hurtful or offensive argumentation; on the contrary, we know what typically happens to Jews around the world in these situations, because it has been witnessed, analysed and measured several times in the past.

/ Threats of harassment and violence

When flare-ups occur in Israel and Gaza, as they have done periodically since Hamas took full control of the area in 2007, the violence spills over onto the streets of cities around the world where Jews live. In the case of the UK, this can be seen clearly in Community Security Trust (CST) data below, in a chart showing the number of antisemitic incidents that have been recorded by the CST every month from January 2000 up to December 2022. The three large spikes, shown in red, coincide directly with such flare-ups in the past.



Source: CST antisemitic incidents reports (www.cst.org.uk).

In understanding these data, it is important to be aware of their shortcomings. As with similar data focused on other minority groups, the numbers of incidents recorded only reflect those that have been reported. And as with racist incidents generally, most antisemitic incidents are *not* reported – a 2018 study conducted by a JPR/Ipsos team for the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that 76% of all incidents of antisemitic harassment that occurred in the twelve months leading up to the survey fell into this unreported category.³ Moreover, the CST only records incidents reported to the CST and/or, in the most recent years, to the police. Incidents that occur and are subsequently reported to other authorities – for

³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018). *Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism - Second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

example, to employers or educational authorities – are not captured. Once we take these factors into account, it quickly becomes evident that the number of incidents happening across the UK significantly exceeds the numbers recorded in CST data.

To gain a more accurate assessment of the scale of antisemitism in the UK, the same FRA survey also records the proportion of Jews across the UK who reported experiencing at least one case of antisemitic harassment in the year prior to the 2018 study. It found that 25% of all adult UK Jews did so at that time, up from 21% in the equivalent study from 2012. Data on the same issue gathered by JPR earlier this year show that the figure is now in excess of 30%.⁴ The Jewish population of the UK currently stands at about 300,000 people.⁵

These findings further demonstrate that the real extent of antisemitism far exceeds what is seen in Jewish community incident data. The reality appears to be that antisemitic harassment is both far more prevalent than is commonly assumed, and that it is particularly liable to spike during periods of intense military conflict in Israel and Gaza.

/ Anxiety and alienation

However, it is important to stress that the vast majority of antisemitic incidents that occur are not violent; most involve in-person or online harassment, so they tend to affect Jewish people's mental rather than physical wellbeing. But in investigating this issue, we once again find evidence of heightened dangers during periods of conflict in Israel/Gaza. Drawing on data gathered in a JPR survey conducted in July 2021, just two months after the last major flare-

56% of all Jews in the UK have reported that public and media criticism of Israel during the 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza made them feel that Jews were not welcome in the UK.

up in Gaza, we found that 73% of all Jewish adults in the UK felt that they were being held responsible in some way for the actions of the Israeli government by non-Jews during the conflict, and 56% said that public and media criticism of Israel at the time made them feel that Jews were not welcome in the UK.⁶ Whilst there is certainly some subjectivity to these feelings, they reveal something very important about the prevalence of anxiety and alienation felt by Jews

across the UK at these times – the discourse about Israel, and the way in which it is conducted and reported, leaves a significant mark on a community of people that, whilst strongly attached to Israel, has no ability whatsoever to shape or influence the country's politics or military. The remarkably common feelings of fear and isolation are related to the profound connection many Jews have with Israel; according to our most recent research (not yet published) close to 90% of Jews across the UK have visited the country at least once, and, as noted above, 71% have family living there. The connections are deep and visceral, so when Israel is attacked, it feels profoundly personal. And in this particular case, following the killing of well over 1,000 mostly civilian Israelis, and the injury and abduction of many more, many British Jews are just one or two degrees of separation away from a victim, their family or friends.

⁴ Source: JPR Research Panel, wave 4 survey, op. cit..

⁵ Staetsky, D. and DellaPergola, S. (2020). *Jews in Europe at the turn of the Millennium: Population trends and estimates*. London, Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

⁶ Graham, D. and Boyd, J. (2023). *Conflict in Israel and Gaza: Heightened feelings of insecurity among Jews in the UK*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

/ Antisemitic attitudes

Notwithstanding this, the UK remains one of the least antisemitic countries in the world. In international comparisons, including the Anti-Defamation League's 'Global 100',⁷ the UK consistently scores relatively well. JPR's own research in this area shows that just over 2% of the population of Great Britain can be characterised as 'hard-core' antisemites (defined as those believing multiple anti-Jewish tropes simultaneously), whereas 70% of the population is found to hold no anti-Jewish views at all. Yet our analysis has also found that 30% of the population believes at least one of the anti-Jewish tropes tested.⁸

In our work, we have not argued that everyone within this 30% is antisemitic; it would be foolish to do so, as most of them both reject many anti-Jewish ideas and indeed support positive statements about the place of Jews in Britain. We rather relate to this finding as the extent to which anti-Jewish attitudes permeate British society – they can be found, at some level and to some degree, among close to a third of the population of Great Britain.

Anti-Jewish tropes tested

- × Jews think they are better than other people
- × The interests of Jews in Britain are very different from the interests of the rest
- × Jews get rich at the expense of others
- × Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes
- × Jews have too much power in Britain
- × The Holocaust has been exaggerated
- × The Holocaust is a myth

The fact that antisemitic ideas permeate British society at this level helps to explain why so many British Jews are affected during these periods of conflict. At times of quiet, it is far less likely that non-Jews will express any underlying prejudice that they may feel towards Jews, simply because Jews and/or Israel are less likely to be discussed in day-to-day conversation. However, when tensions are high and Israel is headline news, such conversations are much more likely, so the probability of antisemitic prejudices being expressed, in-person or online and intentionally or not, increases accordingly.

And this is before one begins to take into account the public demonstrations that always occur at these times. Political demonstrations, of course, are entirely legitimate – they are a fundamental part of democracy itself. But the scope for antisemitic ideas to be expressed at such events is clear. To cite just two examples from recent days, demonstrations outside Sydney Opera House⁹ included chants of 'gas the Jews' and 'fuck the Jews', and at least one demonstrator in New York was recorded brandishing a swastika.¹⁰ This is unbridled antisemitism, and whilst Western political leaders are typically quick to condemn it, arrests and prosecutions are rare. These types of incidents can leave a heavy emotional scar on Jewish people, as can be seen clearly in the data. Even if such behaviour turns out to be the exception rather than the rule, the visuals are inevitably shared widely on social media heightening anxiety and fear levels across the Jewish community.

It is important to stress that the attitudes tested in the research referenced above do not mention Israel in any way – they deliberately focus exclusively on anti-Jewish tropes. But similar anti-Israel ideas have been tested in our research, and these have been found to exist at a considerably higher level among the British public: 12% of adults across Great Britain harbour deep, ideological hatred towards Israel, and 56% hold at least one anti-Israel idea that

⁷ See: <https://global100.adl.org/map/>.

⁸ Staetsky, D. (2017). *Antisemitism in contemporary Great Britain*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

⁹ See: <https://nypost.com/2023/10/10/reprehensible-protestors-chant-gas-the-jews-outside-sydney-opera-house>

¹⁰ See: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12607931/Times-Square-Palestine-rally-Hamas-Israel.html>

a majority of Jews in the UK would characterise as antisemitic.¹¹ And critically, the same study shows that there is a clear correlation between anti-Jewish and anti-Israel sentiment – whilst it is entirely possible to be anti-Israel without holding any traditional anti-Jewish ideas and vice versa, those holding strong anti-Israel views are statistically much more likely to hold anti-Jewish views than those who do not.

/ What can be done?

Containing emotions at these times is extremely difficult. But this paper is designed to raise awareness of the risks, and to help those affected to manage them. It is aimed in part at the media, to raise awareness about the need for sensitivity in reporting, and to call on journalists to be conscious that this is not simply a flare-up in the Middle East, but a profound trauma for many Jews around the world, both in terms of the horrors that have been seen, and the historical memories they evoke. It is aimed at politicians and policymakers, to heighten awareness of the dynamics within and around Jews and Jewish communities at these times, and to assist them in their work to ensure the right protection and support is put in place. It is designed too as a reminder to the police and security services who should be particularly conscious of the security risks facing the Jewish community at this time. It is aimed as well at educational authorities – those running schools and universities – to make them aware of how frightening and alienating these crises can be for Jews studying or working in their institutions, and to call on all those in positions of authority and responsibility to monitor and manage any related activities and discourse with sensitivity and care. It is also targeted at employers everywhere, to encourage them to be conscious of how Jewish employees within their companies and organisations may be impacted by workplace discussion and debate on recent events, and how easy it is for that to touch on some very raw nerves and indeed, on occasion, descend into antisemitism. Lastly, it is aimed at Jews themselves, to share with anyone within their orbits who they feel might benefit from reading it, to try to help protect them from cases of antisemitism, intended or not.

¹¹ Staetsky, D. (2017), *op. cit.*

/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to influence Jewish life positively. Web: www.jpr.org.uk.

/ Author

Dr Jonathan Boyd is the Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and a former Jerusalem Fellow at the Mandel Institute in Israel. A specialist in contemporary Jewry with expertise in the study of Jews in the UK and across Europe, he is a Board member of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, and advisor to several trusts and foundations investing in contemporary European Jewish life. He holds a doctorate in education from the University of Nottingham, and an MA and BA in Jewish history from University College London.