Antisemitism, Anti-Israelism and Canada in Context

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To be published in Robert Kenedy, Uzi Rebhun and Carl Stephan Ehrlich, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Jewish Identity, Israel-Diaspora Relations, and Antisemitism* (New York: Springer, 2021).

Introduction

Some researchers contend that antisemitism is composed of an historically invariant set of core ideas (Wistrich 2010). Others hold that antisemitism varies widely over time and place in form, intensity and effect, depending on a variety of social, political and economic circumstances (Judaken 2018; Urry 2018). Recent discussions reflect this disagreement. On the one hand, some analysts maintain that, especially over the past two decades, an historically unique "new antisemitism" has crystallized. It supposedly conflates negative sentiment toward Israel with antipathy toward Jews, using ancient and medieval antisemitic tropes to vilify the Jewish state. From this point of view, anti-Israelism and antisemitism are typically highly correlated (e.g., Stephens 2019). Critics of the new antisemitism thesis acknowledge the efflorescence of negative sentiment toward Israel in recent decades. However, they claim that anti-Israelism is distinct from antipathy toward Jews. In other words, anti-Israelism and antisemitism are typically weakly correlated, making it possible for one to go so far as to reject the legitimacy of the Jewish state while having nothing against Jews *per se* (e.g., Gordon 2018).[1]

In this paper we take issue with both the new antisemitism thesis and its most ardent critics. We argue that a correlation exists between antisemitism and anti-Israelism, but the correlation varies widely in strength by social context. It follows that, in some cases, extremists on both sides of the debate are correct. However, in most cases they are not.

For purposes of our analysis, we define antisemitism as opposition to the notion that Jews should be treated in the same way as non-Jews, with the expression of this opposition ranging from mild prejudice to genocidal action. We define anti-Israelism as opposition to a range of conditions, ranging from specific state policies to the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

We make our case by examining the Canadian context and referring to research from Canada and other countries. Specifically, we demonstrate that the level of antisemitic sentiment in Canada is relatively low. Moreover, with the exception of the actions of a small number of extremists, antisemitic incidents are not skyrocketing in frequency, contrary to the claims of some observers. We also argue that, while antisemitism and anti-Israelism are correlated in some categories of the population, circumstantial evidence leads one to believe that, in the population at large, the correlation is weak. This finding suggests that antisemitism and anti-Israelism are typically independent attitudinal and behavioral dimensions, with the overlap between them varying by context. It further implies that

[1] For a recent, innovative treatment of the structure of antisemitic attitudes, see DellaPergola (2020).

strong emotional attachment to the Jewish state is compatible with a critical stance toward the current state of political and social affairs in Israel, even a highly critical stance.

The level of antisemitism in Canada

Cross-national studies consistently show that the level of antisemitism in Canada is comparatively low. For example, in 2014 the Anti-Defamation League conducted a survey ranking 102 countries and regions on their level of antisemitic sentiment. Canada ranked 89th (Anti-Defamation League 2014). A 2019 Anti-Defamation League survey of eighteen countries found that only Sweden enjoys a lower level of antisemitic sentiment than does Canada (Anti-Defamation League 2019; see Table 1). Findings from the World Values Survey (2019) yield similar results.[2] Only Quebec, where 22.5 percent of Canadians reside, is an outlier among Canadian provinces. In *la belle province*, antisemitic sentiment is consistently about twice as high as the Canadian average (cf. Brym and Lenton 1991; 1992; Weinfeld 2020).

— Table 1 about here—

Not surprisingly given the cross-national differences, Canadian Jews seem significantly less likely than Jews in the European Union (EU) to perceive antisemitism as a serious issue. While questions asked in recent surveys are not strictly comparable, they give a sense of the magnitude of the difference. Thus, the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada found that 34 percent of Canadian Jews believe Jews in the country "often" experience discrimination. In the same year, a survey conducted among Jews in twelve European Union countries (ten in Western Europe plus Poland and Hungary) found 85 percent of respondents believe that antisemitism in their country is a "very" or "fairly" big problem. French Jews top the list at 95 percent (Brym, Neuman and Lenton 2019: 47; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2018: 16).[3]

Leaving perceptions aside, the annual B'nai B'rith Canada audit of antisemitic incidents provides a cross-time *behavioral* measure of antisemitism in Canada. It culls data from cases of harassment, vandalism and personal violence reported to the police or directly to B'nai Brith Canada (B'nai Brith Canada 2006; 2011; 2016; 2018; 2019). It shows that the number of reported antisemitic incidents per 100,000 Canadians roughly tripled between 1982 and 1995 and roughly quadrupled between 2002 and 2018. This finding led to alarming headlines such as, "A new normal? Antisemitism in Canada sets record for third consecutive year" (B'nai Brith Canada 2019).[4]

The attitudinal and behavioral findings are not necessarily incompatible. It is not inconceivable that, at a given point in time, Canadians are less likely than people in other countries to express antisemitic sentiment while, over time, actions that may be construed as antisemitic are rising sharply everywhere, including Canada. However, six observations may temper the alarm generated by the B'nai Brith Canada data.

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[2] The World Values Survey data are for the period 2000-04, the last period in which Canada was included.

[3] In addition, *experience* of anti-Jewish discrimination seems to be about twice as prevalent in the EU as in Canada (Brym, Neuman and Lenton 2019: 49; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2019: 24).

[4] Such headlines are especially misleading if one bears in mind the situation before the 1960s.

First, over the entire 37-year period covered by the B'nai Brith audit, antisemitic incidents reached a high of 5.5 per 100,000 Canadians. For a standard that helps to put this figure in perspective, we note that it is about one-half the Canadian suicide rate, which is about average for the world (Statistics Canada 2019a).

Second, more than eight out of ten incidents recorded by the B'nai Brith audit involve harassment, fewer than two out of ten involve damage to property, and about one out of 100 involve physical violence. Thus, antisemitic incidents in Canada are overwhelmingly non-violent. The large majority involve name-calling and the like.

Third, about 80 percent of incident reports come directly from members of the community, with the remainder coming from the police. Jewish community awareness of the audit has undoubtedly increased over time, while since about 2001, B'nai Brith's 24-hours–a-day, 7-days-a-week "anti-hate [telephone] hotline" has made reporting easier. At the same time, the percentage of police forces submitting hate crime reports has also increased. Yet better reporting does not necessarily reflect more antisemitism in society.

Fourth, about two-thirds of antisemitic incidents that B'nai Brith now records involve online harassment (B'nai Brith 2019). Given that Facebook began operations in 2004, Twitter in 2006 and Instagram in 2010, and given that the popularity of these and other online platforms has grown rapidly since they went live, a large part of the recent increase in antisemitism is almost certainly the result of new media providing coteries of extremists with fresh opportunities for antisemitic harassment, not growing anti-Jewish sentiment in the Canadian public at large, which, as noted earlier, surveys have failed to detect.

Fifth, we have a second source of behavioral data on antisemitic incidents in Canada that allows us to assess the validity of the B'nai Brith Canada findings: police hate-crime statistics for the period 2006-17 (Allen 2015; Allen and Boyce 2013; Armstrong 2019; Dauvergne and Brennan 2011; Leber 2015; Silver, Mihorean and Taylor-Butts 2004; Statistics Canada 2017; Statistics Canada 2019; Walsh and Dauvergne 2009). Antisemitic incidents that rise to the level of reported crime are only about one-sixth as numerous as the number of antisemitic incidents reported by B'nai Brith Canada. And while hate crimes against Jews registered an uptick in 2017, they show little trend over time. Specifically, between 2006 and 2017, the number of hate crimes rose by three-tenths of one incident per 100,000 Canadians (Brym 2019). Police crime statistics thus call into question the validity of the strong, positive time trend reported by B'nai Brith Canada, at least for the period 2006-17.

The sixth and final reason one might want to temper one's alarm over the B'nai Brith Canada data is that they lump together under the rubric of antisemitism actions that are clearly antisemitic with various types of action that are critical of Israel. For example, B'nai Brith Canada considers antisemitic the application of standards requiring of Israel "behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation" (B'nai Brith 2018). By this criterion, boycotting Israeli goods and services because of human rights violations against Palestinians is an antisemitic act when it is not accompanied by a boycott of, say, China for its occupation of Tibet or its mistreatment of Uyghurs. As we will now argue, one problem with this view is that it ignores the political context of events in the Middle East that likely have a strong bearing on some actions that B'nai Brith Canada regards as antisemitic but are more properly seen as actions targeting Israel-specific policies.

Audit data and Israel

Figure 1 illustrates the problem by dividing the B'nai Brith data into three periods. During period one, stretching from 1982 to 1995, we observe a rise in the rate of antisemitic incidents recorded by B'nai Brith. This was a period in which the audit was first publicized and in which the Canadian Jewish community, the main source of incident reports, was becoming familiar with it. It is likely that a certain but unknown proportion of incidents during this period was due to improved reporting over time rather than an underlying increase in the number of incidents.

—Figure 1 about here—

After a period of stability between 1996 and 2001, the count of antisemitic incidents quadrupled between 2002 and 2018. The rapid rise in the number of reported incidents coincides with a sharp increase in international criticism of Israel.

The steep upward trend began at the height of the second *intifada*. In response to a horrific wave of suicide bombings that killed 284 people and injured 1,575 in 2002 alone, Israel mobilized 20,000 troops to reoccupy the West Bank and part of Gaza, initiated construction of a physical and electronic barrier separating the West Bank from Israel proper, and authorized the assassination of 210 Palestinian military operatives and political leaders (Brym and Araj 2006; 2011; Gazit and Brym 2011). A wave of international outrage over Israeli actions ensued, including the first Palestinian call for a comprehensive economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel, followed by the formation of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement in 2005. These observations suggest that a significant, positive correlation exists between incidents classified as antisemitic by B'nai Brith Canada and international criticism of Israel due to its response to the second *intifada*. In fact, according to the *2018 Global Anti-Semitism Report* published by Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, fully 70 per cent of antisemitic incidents in 2018 were tied to anti-Israel sentiment (Miller 2019).

Two questions remain unanswered by such correlational observations. First, to what degree do antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiments overlap? Second, what circumstances account for variation in the degree of overlap?

Overlap between anti-Jewish and anti-Israel attitudes

Social scientists have conducted surveys in eleven Western countries on the degree of overlap between antisemitism and anti-Israel attitudes (see especially Beattie 2017; Kaplan and Small 2006; Staetsky 2017). The most rigorous of them are based on large and, in most cases, representative samples of adults. They employ batteries of questions tapping attitudes toward Jews and Israel, create internally consistent scales of both attitudinal dimensions, and examine how the correlation between the scales varies across a range of social contexts. Unfortunately, only one Canadian study appears to have been conducted on this subject. It is based on a small, non-representative sample (Baum and Nakazawa 2007). However, its findings are consistent with those of the larger, more rigorous studies conducted elsewhere.[5]

[5] For a more detailed review of this literature, see Brym (2019).

In brief, survey-based studies find that the correlation between antisemitism and negative attitudes toward Israel varies by religion, political orientation and country. The correlation is stronger among Muslims, especially religious Muslims, than among Christians. It is stronger among people with extreme right political views than among others. Among leftists, the correlation between anti-Jewish and anti-Israel attitudes is no higher than in the general population. And among the general population, the correlation is strongest in some southern European countries, such as Spain, and weakest in the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and English-speaking democracies such as the UK and the United States. In short, although some people with strong anti-Israel views tend also to hold strong anti-Jewish views, in countries similar to Canada, the degree of overlap between the two attitudinal dimensions is comparatively low.

Canadian Jews

The results of a recent survey of Canadian Jews are consistent with the view that antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiments are distinct dimensions. The 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada conducted landline and online interviews with a representative sample of 2,335 Canadian adults in four cities where 82 percent of Canada's Jewish population reside: Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver (Brym, Neuman and Lenton 2019). Among other things, the survey shows that it is possible to be critical of Israeli policy concerning the Palestinians without harboring antisemitic attitudes.

We can take for granted that few Canadian Jews are antisemites. At the same time, according to the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada, the great majority of Canadian Jews are emotionally attached to Israel, with 49 percent saying they feel *very* emotionally attached to the country and another 31 percent saying they feel *somewhat* emotionally attached. A remarkable 79 percent of respondents have backed up their sentiment by visiting Israel. These percentages indicate a much stronger bond to the Jewish state than are revealed by comparable figures from the 2013 Pew Survey of American Jews (Pew 2013).

Yet, despite their generally close emotional attachment to Israel, many Canadian Jews are critical of key aspects of Israeli policy concerning the Palestinians. For example, respondents were asked to weigh in on whether the current Israeli government is making a sincere effort to bring about a peace settlement with the Palestinians. Those who responded "no" were 20 percentage points more numerous that those who said "yes." Respondents were also asked whether continued building of settlements on the West Bank helps or hurts the security of Israel. More than two-and-a-half times more respondents said settlement construction hurts Israeli security than said it helps.

Criticisms of such core Israeli policies are more prevalent in some parts of the Canadian Jewish community than in others. Age and denominational differences are notable, as Figure 2 demonstrates. Figure 2 divides respondents into four categories: those who identify with Traditional denominations (Orthodox, Modern Orthodox and Hasidic, totaling 20 percent of the sample); those who identify with the Conservative denomination (28 of the sample); those identify with Liberal denominations (Reform, Reconstructionist and Humanist, totaling 22 percent of the sample); and those who do not specify a

denominational identification or say they are "just Jewish" (30 percent of the sample).[6] As Figure 2 shows, a critical stance toward Israel's West Bank settlement policy is highest among Jews who identify with Liberal denominations and lowest among Jews who identify with Traditional denominations. For all denominations, skepticism decreases with age. Fully eight out of ten Jews under the age of 30 who identify with Liberal denominations believe that Jewish settlements on the West Bank hurt Israel's security. Even among Jews who identify with Traditional denominations, four of ten under the age of 30 agree with that assessment.

—Figure 2 about here—

Conclusion

The case of Canadian Jewry demonstrates that widespread disagreement with core Israeli policies is consistent with positive emotional attachment to the Jewish state. The many Canadian Jews who are critical of Israeli policy concerning the Palestinians are not antisemites, adding weight to the claim that criticism of Israeli policy and antisemitism do not necessarily go hand in hand. Indeed, Canadian Jews who are critical of Israeli policy concerning the Palestinians are part of a long historical tradition of Jews who care deeply about the survival of the Jewish people yet are critical of Zionist practice (Myers 2006; Urry 2018).

People with extreme anti-Israel sentiment are much more likely than others are to harbor antisemitic sentiment. However, such people typically constitute a small minority in countries like Canada. In the UK, for example, most Muslims are not antisemitic, and most agree with many Canadian Jews in their criticism of key aspects of Israeli policy regarding peace negotiations and West Bank settlements. Similarly, although some leftists are antisemites, the great majority of them are not, even though they are likely to criticize Israeli settlement policy and question the current Israeli government's sincerity in its efforts to bring about a peace settlement with the Palestinians (Staetsky 2017).

Political debate on the overlap between antisemitism and criticism of Israel is bound to persist. On one side we will continue to find those who argue that the overlap between antisemitism and criticism of Israel is considerable if not total. It follows from their assumption that narrow scope, or no scope at all, exists for legitimate criticism of the Jewish state, that is, criticism that is not antisemitic. On the other side we will continue to find those who argue that the overlap between antisemitism and criticism of Israel is inconsiderable or non-existent. It follows from their assumption that broad scope exists for legitimate criticism of the Jewish state.

While social scientists will undoubtedly learn much from this debate, the emerging consensus seems to be that antisemitism and attitudes critical of Israel march in tandem less frequently than is often assumed; the reality is closer to the "low overlap" condition depicted in the top half of Figure 3 than the "high overlap" condition depicted in the bottom half, although, as noted, the degree of overlap varies by identifiable social conditions.

[6] This calculation excludes the 6 percent of respondents who did not answer this question or who answered "don't know" or "other."

—Figure 3 about here—

This lesson is particularly important for policy makers concerned with how to strengthen the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora in an era when divergence of opinion concerning core security and human rights issues is considerable and growing. According to the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada, the belief that West Bank settlements hurts Israel's security is weakly but significantly associated with weak emotional attachment to Israel ($r = 0.301$; $p < .01$).[7] This finding is consistent with the view that criticism of Israel's West Bank settlement policy helps to erode emotional attachment to the Jewish state. Furthermore, the correlation between belief that West Bank settlements hurts Israel's security and weak emotional attachment to Israel is stronger among younger age cohorts than among older age cohorts (compare Figure 2 and Figure 4). This finding suggests that, all else the same, persistence of the current West Bank settlement project may exert a strengthening negative impact on the emotional attachment of Canadian Jews to Israel over time.

—Figure 4 about here—

[7] The former variable was coded 1 = help, 2 = does not make a difference, depends, don't know/no answer, 3 = hurt; the latter variable was coded 1 = essential, 2 = important but not essential, 3 = not important, 4 (missing value) = don't know/no answer.

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Table 1 Anti-Defamation League antisemitism index score by country, 2019 (in percent)

Country	Percent
Sweden	4
Canada	8
Denmark	10
Netherlands	10
United Kingdom	11
Germany	15
France	17
Italy	18
Austria	20
Belgium	24
Brazil	25
Spain	28
Argentina	30
Russia	30
Ukraine	38
Hungary	41
Poland	45
South Africa	47

Note: The Anti-Defamation League's antisemitism index is the percentage of respondents in each country who answer "probably true" to six or more of the following eleven statements:

- Jews are more loyal to Israel than to [this country/to the countries they live in]
- Jews have too much power in the business world
- Jews have too much power in international financial markets
- Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust
- Jews don't care what happens to anyone but their own kind
- Jews have too much control over global affairs
- Jews have too much control over the United States government
- Jews think they are better than other people
- Jews have too much control over the global media
- Jews are responsible for most of the world's wars
- People hate Jews because of the way Jews behave

Figure 1 The annual number of antisemitic incidents rose dramatically during and after the second *intifada* and the founding of the BDS movement (B'nai Brith Canada data)

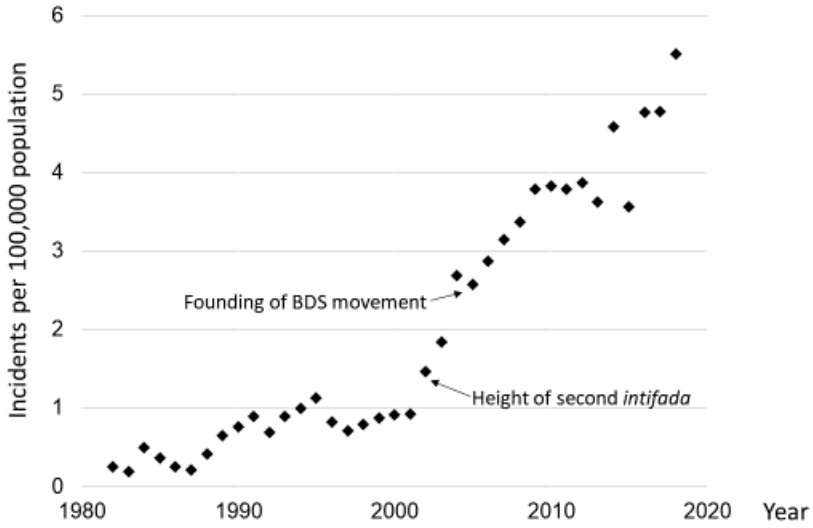
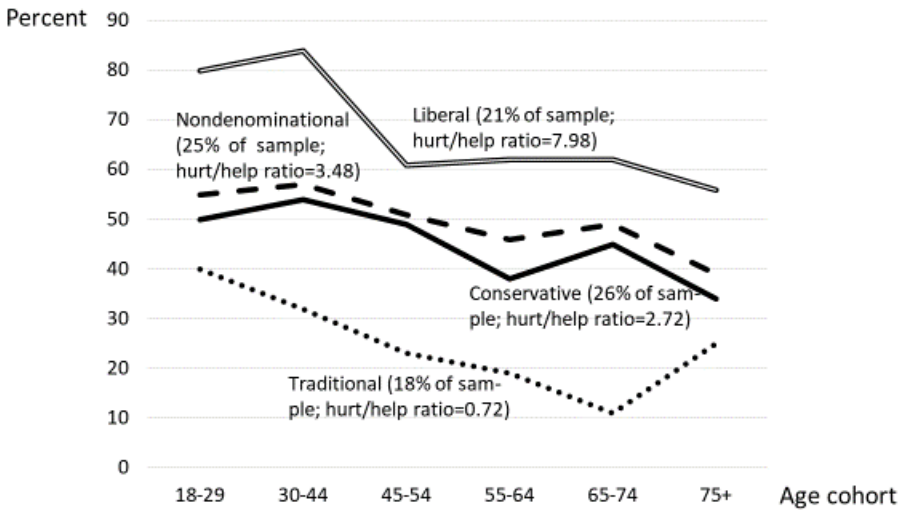


Figure 2 Belief that West Bank settlements hurt Israel's security varies by denomination and age cohort



Note: The remainder of the sample, consisting of "other" and "don't know" responses, is not included here.

Figure 3 The overlap between antisemitism and anti-Israelism varies over time and population category

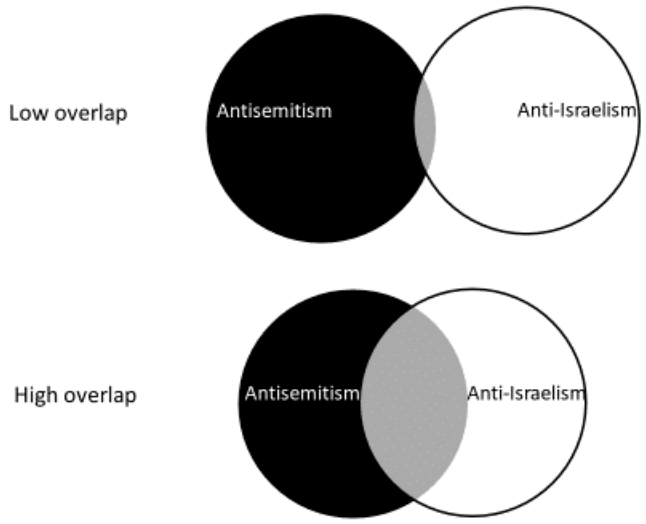
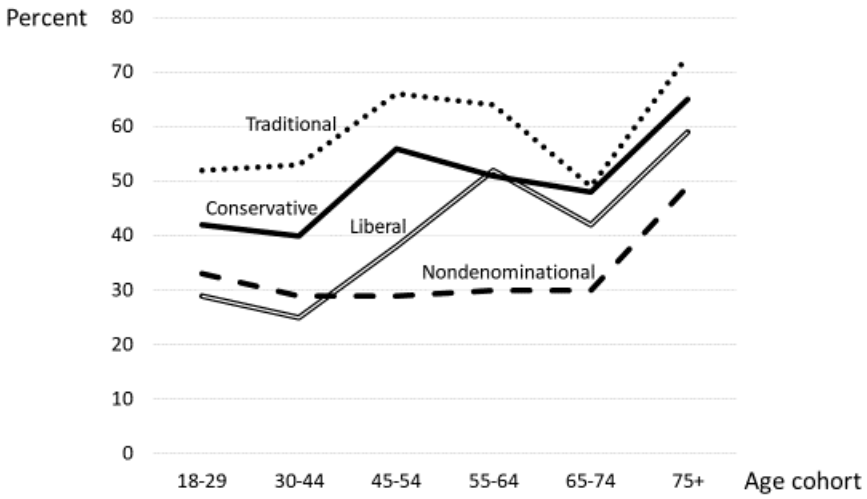


Figure 4 Belief that caring for Israel is an essential part of being Jewish varies by denomination and age cohort



Note: The remainder of the sample, consisting of "other" and "don't know" responses, is not included here.