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BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY: SPOTLIGHT ON ERASIVE ANTI-SEMITISM

Case study of period Feb. 20 – April 3, 2021

The Trend Monitor covering this six-week period focuses on events and discourse affecting Jewish and pro-Israel positioning in U.S. progressive communities in the context of [erasive anti-Semitism](#),ⁱ which refers to the way that contemporary progressive discourse can, often unwittingly, *de-facto* negate the right of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identify, experience, and vulnerability. Within this time period, Reut published my lead-authored paper characterizing this emerging strain of hostility, prejudice, or bias towards Jews emanating through the left. We believe that it is hard to identify,ⁱⁱ and call to engage in discourse to better identify it and organize accordingly.

This document highlights significant events that amplify a feedback loop that erasive anti-Semitism sets off, [in which](#) “being designated as a ‘white oppressor’ means you don’t get to define the terms of conversations, the pertinent features defining your identity, or the priority level your perceived vulnerability receives. It confers upon its bearer an implicit obligation to renounce the right to contest it.”

A number of examples in events and discourse over this time period amplify the two dynamics driving the aforementioned feedback loop. Specifically, one cluster of trends indicates the potency of ‘white oppressor’ framing of Jews; a second trend cluster centers around a related rejection of Jewish voices specifically in defining Jewish vulnerability.

- The Jewish ‘white oppressor’ framing surfaced dominantly in the educational arena, with a battle for defining Jewish identity played out over the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and in campus forums excluding Jews on the basis of this categorization. The flattening of identity lends itself to a binary framing of Israel in the white oppressor role, within the context of a foreign policy approach centered on an ‘even-handed’ advancement of human rights on the basis of these categorizations.
- A confiscation of the Jewish voice in defining Jewish vulnerability rests upon the ‘white oppressor’ framing, manifesting in: attempts to discredit the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism; wielding of silencing charges to discredit attempts to call out anti-Semitism; diminishing priority accorded Jewish grievances in the face of parallel societal struggles; and attacks on Jewish community organizations as legitimately representing the Jewish experience.

In both, implications are palpable to Jewish and pro-Israel communities in the U.S. and to the Jewish state. The [risk](#) is to neutralizing Jewish voices on Jewish and pro-Israel agendas and challenging the legitimacy of Jewish advocacy for individual or collective Jewish security and against discrimination. At stake is empowering representative Jewish voices to articulate lived experiences and anti-Semitism and what it looks like, and claiming the societal legitimacy needed for airing grievances. Implications also poses a real threat to the exceptionality of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

The broader progressive context

A new administration has meant significant changes in where influence lies, and in the political advocacy infrastructure. In the past six weeks, several indicators point to rising influencing of progressive Jewish groups. In the broader progressive sphere, there are signs that the progressive wing of the Democratic Party is building roots, and institutionalizing organization modes focused on the grassroots and emphasizing the local. Its foreign policy agenda poses a challenge to pro-Israel communities, manifesting this past month largely on Iran.ⁱⁱⁱ

FLATTENING IDENTITY: THE WHITE OPPRESSOR

‘[Erasive anti-Semitism](#)’ stems from a conceptual mismatch in which Jews are cast uniformly as powerful white oppressors based on binary sets of such ‘conceptual categories,’ centered on class-

based and skin color-based designations,^{iv} as well as a categorical division between defenders of the status quo versus promoters of a radical upending thereof.

Erasive anti-Semitism rejects the notion that the Jewish experience deviates from these conceptual categories or that the nature of collective Jewish vulnerability is unique and tracks differently from other dominant experiences of oppression. This ‘de-exceptionalizing’ manifested in the six-week period covered in this document in the ‘flattening’ of Jewish identity to ‘white oppressor’ categories in the education system in the U.S. On Israel, a parallel flattening combines with a progressive ‘inclusive foreign policy’ approach, which seeks to engage even-handedly through a human-rights centered prism, and which fails to distinguish the pillars underlying the U.S.-Israel relationship, or Israel’s unique circumstance within the region, in conducting engagement. In particular:

- **White oppressor categorization reflected in education curricula, and specifically in the recent [passage](#) of California’s ethnic studies curriculum** – Controversy following a lengthy process of challenges by Jewish groups elevates the core issue of flattening Jewish identities to the point of erasure, in this case as manifest within California’s education system in characterizing the Jewish experience in terms of its belonging to ‘white’ and ‘privileged’ categories. ^v Additionally, a number of reports exposed Jewish students’ exclusion from progressive spaces because they are seen as benefiting from white privilege (see examples [here](#) and [here](#)).
- **Foreign policy concepts that position human rights at the center of a prism that frames Israel within a ‘white oppressor’ category** were applied in this period to: legislative initiatives^{vi}; perspectives on Iran^{vii}; fighting anti-Semitism^{viii}; and interpreting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.^{ix} (The inclusive foreign policy approach is also influencing perceptions of the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, diminishing the Saudi and Gulf States brand (see [here](#) and [here](#), for example), which could sour potential “PR benefits” of the Abraham Accords.)

Moreover, in its emphasis on ‘inclusion’ to mean an equal application of the categories it enforces, inclusive foreign policy lends credence to a burgeoning “progressive except Palestine” charge. It calls out as a false conceit or as a lie the exceptional in the Israeli reality, the U.S.-Israel relationship, and the Jewish people, which are not captured by its dominant conceptual categories.^x

Gains made in progressive approach to Israel may be facilitated in the context of a broader Biden administration deprioritizing Middle East (see [here](#) and [here](#), for example),^{xi} and given the re-centering post-Trump of the centrality of democracy and human rights to U.S. foreign policy positioning.^{xii}

DEFINING VULNERABILITY, ANTI-SEMITISM

In the six-week time period covered, **undermining the Jewish right to self-define – through identity flattening, de-exceptionalizing, and re-categorization – also diminished Jewish self-advocacy**, and in particular defining Jewish vulnerability and anti-Semitism and combating it accordingly.

Attacking the IHRA

The IHRA is significant in representing a widely unified Jewish consensus guiding institutional identification of anti-Semitism, and which also described forms of anti-Semitism that emerge from the political left.^{xiii} Even as the definition continues to make headways in codifying anti-Semitism,^{xiv} this success with institutional adoption of the definition creates tension with its potential for grassroots adoption. Importantly, progressive Jewish groups including J Street, the New Israel Fund, and Americans for Peace Now [urged](#) the administration not to adopt the definition with its examples. Recent progressive Jewish campaigns against the IHRA dismiss the definition as a way to conflate anti-Semitism with criticism of Israel, see [here](#); and charge it with exemplifying right-wing cancel culture advanced by the American Jewish community, see Peter Beinart [here](#). Seeking to counter the prospect of the IHRA's widespread adoption, two alternate efforts have emerged over the past six-week period.^{xv}

Deploying the silencing charge to undermine Jewish claims of anti-Semitism

Categorizing Jews as 'white oppressors' engenders heightened vulnerability to a framing of Jewish and pro-Israel challenges to forms of anti-Semitism that appear on the progressive left as silencing campaigns. The silencing charge is a main contention against the IHRA, and one notably echoed within the progressive Jewish community in recent weeks.^{xvi} It is rife in progressive media^{xvii}; echoed on campus in charges of Jewish complicity in systems of racism and oppression for their silencing of free speech, for example [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#); and was brought to the [fore](#) with national prominence in a UCLA case to shield the identities of Palestinian rights activists to protect them from harassment.

The broad attention paid to Cornel West's [charge](#) that Harvard declined to consider him for tenure in part due to his outspoken criticism of Israel's treatment of Palestinians, which Harvard [contests](#), amplified the silencing charge, as did vigorous campus [support](#) for the professor.^{xviii} Cornel West called the Palestinian cause a taboo issue at Harvard in a recent [interview](#).

Right to grievance, to 'take up space'

Part of the price of erasure is a diminishing legitimacy of grievance claims. More fundamentally, it is about the right of members of societal groups to take up societal space. Events and discourse in recent week indicating **threats to mainstreaming strains of anti-Semitism on the left, have**

also drawn attention to the evasiveness of labeling and combating its manifestations.^{xix} Addressing evasive strains of anti-Semitism is more complex when coming from leaders in the racial justice struggle,^{xx} generating questions of whether the Jewish community ‘has the right’ to call them out for anti-Semitism given their larger contributions.

Challenging the Jewish organizational establishment in defining Jewish vulnerability from within

Stepped-up campaigns from within the Jewish progressive left against the Jewish establishment seek to delegitimize its voice on social justice issues and in representing the Jews, including in defining and combating anti-Semitism.^{xxi}

ⁱ Jewish author Ben Freeman [coined](#) the concept of ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ to describe the erasure of Jewish identity and the erasure of Jews as victims of prejudice. Reut’s paper refers to the phenomenon as an undermining of Jewish narrative self-determination negating the rights of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identity, experience, and vulnerability.

ⁱⁱ The Reut [paper](#) describes how “unlike ‘classic’ anti-Semitism, this ‘erasive’ form does not necessarily feed on hatred; rather, it is sustained by an acceptance of prevalent framing on the progressive left.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example:

- **Rising influence of progressive Jewish groups**, e.g.: this [call](#) by six prominent progressive U.S. Jewish groups – including Ameinu, Americans for Peace Now, J Street, New Israel Fund, Partners for Progressive Israel and T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights for the Biden administration to revoke a last-minute directive from the previous White House that requires all U.S. exports from West Bank settlements to be labeled as “made in Israel” – [seen](#) as a key early test for the new president; growing [attention](#) to J Street’s evolving role; and a potential [showdown](#) surrounding the Biden administration’s appointment of the next Special Envoy on Anti-Semitism pitting “an increasingly emboldened left-wing camp” against “more traditional establishment figures.”

- **Progressive moves to push Biden to the left on Israel:** A coalition of progressive and other groups, led by the National Iranian American Council, uniting in a “week of action” to [pressure](#) Biden to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal; and this Blue Tent [article](#) echoing claiming that “within the Democratic Party, there is a clear, strong, and growing movement opposing the United States’ one-sided and unwaveringly pro-Israel policies and action.”

General uptick in attention to emerging means of progressive influence: Through White House access (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#)), in plans to challenge moderate Democrats in primaries, and in organizing on local levels. Progressive Democrats lining up to [challenge](#) House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer include prominent progressive [challenger](#) to Mckayla Wilkes, who announced she intends once again to primary Hoyer, has condemned “[Israeli apartheid](#).” Other vulnerable incumbents likely to face significant progressive challenges include New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Senate Majority Leader Chuck [Schumer](#).

Progressive influence on electoral dynamics on local levels are evident in the New York mayoral race, in which candidates’ stances on BDS have emerged as a key issue, and in some cases as a litmus test. See [on](#) potential costs of left-leaning identification and association with BDS endorsers to Jewish and pro-Israel communities; and on Andrew Yang’s stumble after taking a bold stance against BDS and later [clarifying](#) his openness to learning more about the subject. See also, in a crowded New Mexico heavily Democratic congressional race, Israel policy – in a field of otherwise largely ideologically aligned candidates – [stood out](#) as a distinguishing issue and illustrated the growing moderate-progressive tension around the issue.

^{iv} See: John McWhorter in [The Atlantic](#) on the role of today’s language and conceptual basis in framing social justice as quest to redress race-based disparities.

^v Jewish groups [grudgingly](#) admit improvement in the current version (see [AJC](#), for example); many still commented on the persistence of the core problem – see, for example, Tyler Gregory [here](#): “For too long in our classrooms, Jewish identity has been flattened and distorted to that of a white religious minority; and Brett Stephens in the [New York Times](#) on “a new identity, known in the jargon of ethnic studies as “conditional whiteness,” which simultaneously erases their past and racializes their present.”

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- vi See, for example: Letter to Secretary of State Blinken signed by [Rashida Tlaib](#) and 10 colleagues urging engagement in Israel and the Palestinians to be grounded in international law and human rights, using the term ‘colonization’ and urging a no-tolerance policy.
- vii See, for example, in Peter Beinart [questioning](#) the framing of Iran as uniquely bad actor, claiming that its foreign policy is “no more aggressive than those of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, or Israel, its chief regional competitors”; and in a Trita Parsi tweet than Ilan Omar [retweeted](#) claiming that what the New York Times labels as Israeli “clandestine operations” would be called “terrorism” when applied to Iran. See [here](#) on a “vocal faction of dovish foreign policy thinkers, who are increasingly signaling their dissatisfaction with Biden’s initial moves in the Middle East... on issues ranging from re-entering the Iran deal to re-evaluating Washington’s relationship with regional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia.”
- viii See, for example, an INN [letter](#) to Blinken signed by more than 40 progressive Jewish political figures and leaders urging the appointment of an anti-Semitism envoy who treats the matter as part of a fight for a just multi-racial democracy.
- ix For example in equating racial justice in the U.S. to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of the same struggle – see in [Blue Tent](#): “If it’s wrong to abuse migrants and racial minorities in the U.S., it’s wrong for American tax dollars to support the same brutality in Palestine.”
- x See, for example, in the publication of Marc Lamont Hill’s new book with Michell Plitnick, called ‘Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics,’ billed as a “bold call for the American Left to extend their politics to the issues of Israel-Palestine” from a *New York Times* bestselling author and expert on U.S. policy in the region; and in what Palestine Legal [calls](#) the “Palestine exception to free speech” in the U.S.
- xi The urgency of other agendas may mean taking risks on unpopular Israel policy may [carry](#) fewer costs. [J Street’s polling](#) has found that only five percent of Jewish voters thought Israel was a top-two issue in 2020. According to J Street’s director of communications, the upside of that is that the administration doesn’t need to worry too much about a backlash from voters and can instead “make the right decisions about what they think is the right policy on the merits.”
- xii See, for example, Blinken [telling](#) the HRC’s main annual session that “the United States is placing democracy and human rights at the center of our foreign policy”; emphasizing the primacy of these values, State Department spokesman Ned Price [told](#) reporters that the U.S. would like to encourage “forging a historic peace” between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but only if Riyadh “respects America’s values.”
- xiii From the ‘Erasive anti-Semitism’ [report](#): “A broadly consensual definition could play a key role in coalescing a broad ideological spectrum of Jewish leaders, organizations, and activists to present a unified front in protecting Jews’ right to define their own experience; affirming the necessity, as is true of other societal groups, that Jewish voices are the empowered agents in doing so. Moreover, defining and achieving consensus around definitions is critical for efforts to identify, learn and engage constructively, credibly call out prejudice and discrimination, and discredit attempts to smear individuals and organizations that are calling out anti-Semitism.”
- xiv See, in recent examples, Israel’s [initiative](#) for the UN to adopt the IHRA; Kentucky becoming first state to [adopt](#); AJC [urging](#) UN member states to adopt; Secretary of State Tony Blinken [writing](#) that the Biden administration “enthusiastically embraces” the definition; and its adoption on campuses, such as in the UGA [SGA](#) and the University of [Texas](#).
- xv **The Jerusalem Declaration:** Advocates of [this](#) initiative [include](#) well-known critics of current Israeli policies as well as figures in the mainstream of modern Jewish scholarship, including Susannah Heschel, the chairwoman of the Jewish studies program at Dartmouth; A.B. Yehoshua, the Israeli novelist; and Dov Waxman, the chairman of Israel studies at UCLA. **The Jerusalem Declaration^{xv} is significant in that:**
- **It does not consider supporting an end to Israel and denying a Jewish right to national self-determination as anti-Semitic**, even if the position is held exclusively in regard to the Jewish state (and not a product of an evenly applied ideological opposition to nation-states).
 - **It does address facets of left-wing anti-Semitism** including holding Jews collectively responsible for Israel, **seeming to protect the Jewish right to successfully dissociate with the Jewish state**. It positions itself as the outcome of a need to protect “legitimate political speech and action concerning Zionism, Israel, and Palestine.”
 - **It lays out a principled opposition to ‘exceptionalizing’ anti-Semitism** from the dominant frameworks that are based on skin color- and class-based dominant constructs. In its third sentence, the Declaration defines its overall stance rejecting viewing anti-Semitism in terms other than those dominant in the overall fight against all forms of discrimination. Signatories attested to their principled [opposition](#) to perceptions of Jewish exceptionalism, or the idea that Jews are a people for whom special rules need to be made.
- The Nexus Document:** The [NEXUS document](#) is a working definition of anti-Semitism promoted by leading liberal Jewish leaders to be [considered](#) as the ‘gemarah’ to the IHRA’s ‘Mishnah.’ Like the Jerusalem Declaration, it rejects the aim of codifying anti-Semitism and seeks to serve instead as “a guide for policymakers and community leaders as they grapple

with the complexities at the intersection of Israel and antisemitism.” The work of the group, called the Nexus Task Force, was endorsed by more than 100 prominent Jewish leaders in a [letter](#) to President Joe Biden. The document significantly:

- **Puts front and center the principle of the Jewish right to define Jewish experienced vulnerability:** “All claims of antisemitism made by Jews, like all claims of discrimination and oppression in general, should be given serious attention.”
- **Labels anti-Zionism or negative treatment of Israel anti-Semitic conditionally,** only if “based of a claim that Jews alone should be denied the right to define themselves as a people and to exercise any form of self-determination.”
- **[Distinguishes](#) from the IHRA definition in not holding the application of double-standards in regards to Israel as innately anti-Semitic.**

xvi See, for example, [Peter Beinart](#) on the IHRA as a Jewish establishment version of right-wing cancel culture; in [Jewish Currents](#) on its use “almost exclusively to silence Palestinians...”

xvii See, for example, in a Blue Tent [article](#) titled ‘The Democratic Taboo on Palestine Might Be Breaking’ that discusses “Israel-related firings” and other forms of “cancellation”; in [The Intercept](#), by Alex Kane, on pro-Israel silencing; and in [+972 Magazine](#) on mounting challenges on striking down anti-boycott legislation as unconstitutional, and on “cross-movement organizing... to undermine efforts to smear Israel critics as antisemitic” and on silencing charges on [campus](#) (also by Alex Kane) and the “millions of dollars over the years into making organizing for Palestine on campus difficult, pressuring university administrations to place bureaucratic obstacles against Palestinian rights groups and launching smear campaigns against them.

xviii In a [petition, signed](#) by over 90 organizations and interest groups at Harvard, including Jewish groups such as the Jewish Coalition for Peace, students called the denial of tenure “a testament to Harvard’s continued expulsion of faculty who offer incisive analysis of white supremacy, racial capitalism, Zionism, and the military-industrial complex.”

xix See, for example: A Forbes piece that [ponders](#) why anti-Semitism is “still cool” and bemoans the now-familiar pattern of a high-profile personality dabbling in anti-Semitism and then embarking upon a process of repentance accompanied by members of the Jewish community (recent contexts include the Miami Heat’s [Myers Leonard](#), and the unfolding saga surrounding Nick Cannon [here](#) and [here](#)); a [piece](#) in The Hill about the difference in how right-wing versus left-wing anti-Semitism is called out; the persistence of using Orthodox Jews as ‘hategoats,’ e.g. [blamed](#) for ‘koshering Marjorie Taylor Greene, negatively [portrayed](#) in popular entertainment, [called out](#) by the New York Times for pulling the strings in the Trump administration’s granting of clemency for white-collar criminals, and [vilified](#) for conduct on flights; and complaints about a perception that there is a larger [lack of allyship](#) with Jews. See also [this](#) from David Bernstein on pressure to renounce grievances in exchange for Jewish inclusion to admission in progressive circles.

xx In the past weeks, the issue has come to a fore as Marc Lamont Hill [signs](#) on the Black News Channel, which is re-launching next month; with [accusations](#) of Jewish student groups silencing Angela Davis; and around Tamika Mallory being featured at the Grammy’s (opposing viewpoints [here](#) and [here](#)).

xxi See criticism of the organized Jewish community challenging its role in defining Jewish vulnerability, such as: in [Inside Higher Ed](#), on Jewish influence in policing speech such as through IHRA, and [here](#); on its internal illegitimacy, such as in Peter Beinart’s reaction to a his [cancelled talk](#) that he is “sorry (though not surprised) this happened. It’s because the American Jewish establishment is an oligarchy run largely by its (often right-wing) donors,” and in his Zoom [event](#) highlighting people who worked at AIPAC talking “about what the organization is actually like, from the inside”; on its corrosive external impacts, such as in this Jewish Currents [piece](#) on ‘The Anti-Democratic Origins of the Jewish establishment’; and in the new [Jewish Currents](#) investigative fund “seeking stories with the potential to affect the course of Jewish institutional power, intervene in progressive politics and policy-making, or both.”