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TREND DETECTOR NO. 14: FRAMING THE JEWISH AND ISRAELI ESTABLISHMENT IN PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE



TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'

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Framing the Jewish and Israeli establishment in progressive discourse

Trend Detector 14

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Introduction and summary

This Trend Detector covers an approximate two-week period ending August 29, and analyzes discourse affecting Jewish and pro-Israel positioning in U.S. progressive communities during this time.

This period featured three main foreign policy events that dominated coverage and commentary: the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, a Palestinian Authority crackdown against human rights activists, and Israeli PM Bennett's visit to U.S. President Joe Biden. While they don't directly relate to Israel to the same degree, **articulated within progressive discourse they often share a common centering on opposing 'the establishment' or establishments. Within that framing, Israel consistently appears as a 'white establishment oppressor' exemplar.**¹

¹ See [here](#): This framing is an outcome of a 'conceptual mismatch': **Dominant conceptual categories that form bases of progressive worldviews can fail to capture, or actively distort, the historic and lived Jewish experience.** Jews are cast uniformly as powerful white oppressors. A resulting negation or erasure that undermines Israel's status in the U.S. and contributes to hostility, discrimination, or bias against Jews.

Domestically, **diverse voices are increasingly visible and speaking about contemporary progressive frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory, and their varied applications. This opening in the broader conversation presents an opportunity for Jewish communities to impact on how progressive discourse evolves.**

The target is establishment hypocrisy

A binary discourse significantly characterized by attribution of inherent culpability to establishment institutions characterized progressive reactions to the main events that occurred over the two-week period. Reaction reflected an automatic mistrust of establishment sympathies (for example, in [cynicism](#) about American claims “to be defending the ‘rules-based order’”), which **undergirds growing calls for “even-handed” foreign policy in relation to Israel; and against Israel’s ‘special status’ and the status quo of the U.S.-Israel special relationship (e.g., [here](#)).**²

Why condemn Israel and not the Taliban?

Alongside events unfolding in Afghanistan, a number of **Jewish social and mainstream media voices derided the failure of the progressive left to take an impassioned stand against the Taliban** (e.g., [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)); juxtaposing the relative silence of, for example, the Squad, with their vigorous focus on condemning Israel. Indeed, discourse within the past two weeks reflected that the bulk of **progressive condemnation of human rights abuses is directed at recipients of U.S. establishment support and legitimization.**

Progressive turn their back on the Palestinian Authority

A PA crackdown against human rights activists, an occurrence that over the years has been reported on not infrequently, **triggered a [wave](#) of left-wing [condemnation](#). The reaction was noteworthy for its platformed amplifiers and high visibility** (see prominent examples: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Moreover, whereas progressive criticism of the PA has often focused on charges that it acts as a ‘contractor’ for the Israeli establishment, this wave (led and supported by U.S.-based progressive voices from the region, e.g. [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) **reflects a further and more mainstream shift in the framing of support on the broader left for the Palestinian people and not the Palestinian Authority.**

Dominant categorizations in this context center on power-based and skin color-based designations, as well as a categorical division between defenders of the status quo versus promoters of a radical upending thereof.

² In the background, a new [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) survey found that only 22 percent of Democrats considered Israel “an ally.” Also see this [Washington Post](#) article describing the “acute” issue of American support veering away “from its bipartisan footing” as “part of a stark shift in Democratic attitudes toward Israel in recent years.”

Israel as an establishment oppressor force

Over the past two-week period, progressive discourse reflecting this framing, including:

- **Characterizing Zionism as rooted in nationalist white supremacy**, for example in this [Washington Post](#) op-ed on Israel as an apartheid and “racial supremacist regime,” and engaged in settler colonization. Also, the author of a Daily Beast [piece](#) that criticized the choice of Mayim Bialik as a ‘Jeopardy’ host, including because of her sympathy towards Israel and referring to Israeli soldiers as “genocidal” (subsequently [retracted](#)), later [defined](#) Zionism as “an articulation of white supremacy.”³ Parallel discourse conflated the Palestinian and Black American experiences, e.g. [here](#).
- **Emphasizing Israel’s establishment power beyond its borders**, reflected in an [INN campaign](#) in advance of the Biden-Bennett meeting urging Biden to “stand up to Bennett,” and in a [US Campaign for Palestinian Rights](#) position paper on the Ben and Jerry’s decision that characterized “Israeli-led repression and bullying” as resulting in “censorship, persecution, and legal repercussions for advocating for Palestinian liberation.”
- On the occasion of its anniversary, **the Abraham Accords derided as “security pacts for U.S. backed authoritarian regimes.”**

Framing the influence of the ‘Jewish establishment’

In a period characterized by increasing inter-Democratic party strife and growing fissures in progressive-moderate divides, discourse in the past two weeks has framed a Jewish communal establishment as oppositional to progressive movements and agendas, including in the:

- **Framing of the role of the Jews in the progressive-moderate battle as a pro-establishment force** and a bulwark against a takeover by the progressive left.⁴ See, for example, in a positive sense, Rep. Richie Torres on the “natural marriage between the pro-Israel Jewish community and the African American community... that can be the marriage that saves our party from the extreme hard-left.” Taking a critical perspective, a [New York Times](#) article on moderate-progressive divides describes some moderates that “have backed a new pro-Israel group, Democratic Majority for Israel, determined to thwart the party’s emerging Palestinian rights movement - and defeat left-wing candidates who they say have crossed an unacceptable political line on the Jewish state.” It notes progressive fury at DMFI charges

³ Relatedly, our upcoming Version B of the report on [Erasive Antisemitism](#) discusses a growing ‘de-coupling threat,’ wherein disassociation from Israel or Zionism has become an imperative for maintaining a societally accepted Jewish identity.

⁴ Notably in [The Intercept](#) (albeit in the context of domestic agendas), according to a senior Congressional Progressive Caucus member, within “... the dynamic of Congress... moderates aren’t really doing as well... Schumer, Pelosi and Biden are finding their agenda isn’t far from the CPC agenda and it’s an easier partnership than with moderates.”

that some of its money came from prominent Trump-associated businessperson and Jewish philanthropist Robert Kraft.

- **Surfacing of a curriculum that vilifies power and influence of the Jewish institutional establishment** proposed by a new consultancy, the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Institute (see [here](#) and [here](#)).
- **Mistrust of Jewish institutions expressed by Jewish voices from the left and far left**, e.g., “using fears of antisemitism to bolster support for Israeli policy and silence opponents” ([here](#)). An open letter to AIPAC leaders [condemning](#) ads against members of the ‘Squad,’ and specifically [charging](#) the organization with imperiling the life of Rep. Ilhan Omar, was notable in light of PM Bennett’s meeting with AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr, and not with a variety of Jewish leaders as had been [expected](#), ahead of his meeting with President Biden.

A growing debate around contemporary progressive discourse

The ‘Jewish problem’ in contemporary progressive discourse⁵ is increasingly a focus for U.S. Jewish communities. Strong, clear Jewish voices are framing the battle around articulated frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (or Critical Social Justice [here](#)), and “woke-ism” as a cultural movements (e.g., [here](#)). They protest against the fundamental illiberalism in the rigidity of these conceptual systems and in their binary nature, and their “inevitable antisemitic manifestations” (see [here](#)). They seek to discredit these frameworks, and to thus challenge the contemporary progressive discourse, which is significantly influenced by them.

At the same time, a [question](#) arises regarding whether it is ‘wokeness’ writ large or Jewish representation within it that need to be addressed; and subsequently, whether Jewish communal goals should focus on undermining or impacting contemporary progressive discourse and its underlying premises.⁶

Importantly, recent weeks reflect to a high degree of dynamicism and fluidity as **a fraught broader society grapples visibly with implications of contemporary progressive frameworks and discourse.** (See for example in the New York Times from the past two weeks: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#); and, relatedly, broader challenges surfacing regarding the construct of “whiteness,” e.g. [here](#) and specifically regarding [Asian Americans](#).) Amidst this turbulent, indicators point to:

- **The common ground in the fundamental premise:** Attempts to implement dogmatic frameworks are often premised in an acknowledgment “that racism is real, that opposing

⁵ A negation or erasure that can occur when ‘conceptual categories’ that contemporary progressive discourse frequently imposes upon Jews, undermine Israel’s status in the U.S. and contribute to hostility, discrimination, or bias against Jews.

⁶ Our soon-to-be-published Version B of the report on [Erasive Antisemitism](#) suggests that the mobilizing aim of a Jewish communal response should be framed as carving out a space *within* contemporary progressive discourse, staking the claim for the legitimacy of the Jewish voice in defining Jewish identity, experience, and vulnerability. We call this Jewish narrative self-determination.

it requires active engagement and that our community and curriculum are enriched when we aren't blind to race's influence" (see [here](#) on CRT frameworks in New York private school). Substantive debates center on destructive effects of extremity, dogma, and rigidity in application.

- **Alienating effects of aiming for dismantlement:** Working to wholesale undermine progressive discourse on race is frequently viewed by those directly affected as seeking to obstruct and negate hard-gained progress on addressing racism, e.g., [here](#). It can also alienate significant parts of the Jewish center and left whose natural sympathies ally with social justice agendas.

Moreover, there is growing [attention](#) to the role that social media amplification of moral outrage can play in spreading political polarization – a dynamic that poses a particular threat to the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel communities on the left.