



קבוצת ראות
Reut Group

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TREND DETECTOR NO. 15:

ADDRESSING JEWISH ERASURE IN A CONTEXT OF EXTREME POLARIZATION



TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'



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ADDRESSING JEWISH ERASURE IN A CONTEXT OF EXTREME POLARIZATION

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Introduction and summary

This Trend Detector covers an approximate two-week period ending September 12, 2021. It analyzes discourse affecting Jewish and pro-Israel positioning in U.S. progressive communities during this time.

Main themes reflected the extent to which the extremity of underlying societal polarization, also within the Jewish community, is often impeding efforts to articulate the scope and the nature of challenges that emerge from the progressive left. This was prominently reflected in disparate perspectives on Critical Race Theory and on the contemporary forms that antisemitism takes.

Meanwhile, a discourse emerges that reflects growing attention within Jewish communities to the ways that contemporary progressive discourse can lead to a negation, ‘[erasure](#)¹,’ of Jewish narratives; as well as emerging initiatives that aim to address these effects. Related highlights over this period have focused on Jewish campus initiatives and the Israeli government’s prioritization of repairing relations with the U.S. left.

¹ For more on this, please see, released this month by Reut, our [paper](#) on Jewish erasure in progressive discourse and response approaches.

Disparate Jewish takes on antisemitism

Discourse in the past two-week period revealed disparate viewpoints from Jewish communities on the nature of the antisemitism threat, e.g.:

- **Emphasizing antisemitism from the left**, such as in [this](#) description of antisemitism from the left seeking to “threaten and intimidate American Jews into concealing or shedding fundamental parts of their Jewish identity.”
- **Emphasizing antisemitism from the right as a ‘corrective’**: See [this](#) description from [Waging Nonviolence](#) of a collaborative effort – initiated by JFREJ, Bend the Arc, and IfNotNow – to track antisemitism on the right. A goal is framed as offering a corrective balance to counter the perceived prevalence of Jewish communal focus on condemning antisemitism that emerges from progressive movements and individuals.²
- **Disunity on which battles to fight**: With Burlington, Vermont potentially becoming the first in the nation to support a boycott of Israel, [disagreement](#) within Vermont’s Jewish community inhibited the emergence of a vigorous opposition from more of the state’s synagogues and Jewish leaders.
- **Differential threat urgency assessment**: During this two-week period, the FBI released its 2020 [report](#) about hate crimes³; with its conclusions regarding Jews subject to significantly divergent framing in discourse. The proportion of religiously motivated hate crimes targeting Jews (57.5%) dominated one perspective prominent in Jewish discourse (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#)). Another perspective emphasized that the statistics reflect a decrease in attacks on Jews as compared with the previous year, e.g. [here](#) – a frame also reflected in non-Jewish coverage, e.g. [here](#).

Pointing to a countervailing trend, [this](#) Steven Windmueller essay discusses potential to disrupt polarization dividing Jewish communities, positing “a major Jewish political reset is underway,” and predicting the likely emergence of new structural initiatives that reframe the Jewish conversation and establish middle grounds between political extremes. Significantly, Deborah Lipstadt, the designated new U.S. special envoy to combat and monitor antisemitism, has spoken out against antisemitism both on the right and the left, as highlighted [here](#).

Polarizing discourse around CRT

Discourse within the past approximate two-week period significantly featured polarization around critical race theory and its applications, which are of critical interest as Jewish and pro-Israel communities contend with the effects of related discourse (see [Erasive Antisemitism](#):

² The description of the group’s approach as “intersectional, anti-oppression politics that sees antisemitism as one part of the larger framework of white supremacy” reflects a ‘bundling’ of antisemitism, automatically linking Jewish claims with parallel claims of other, often politically expedient, groups. It is a prominent feature of progressive discourse that can limit Jewish voices in reflecting the Jewish experience, identity, and vulnerability, and especially where these diverge from prevalent frames that contemporary progressive discourse applies.

³ Notably, the data were compiled before the most recent conflict in Israel and Gaza erupted, and utilizing methodology [criticized](#) to not accurately reflect the scope of the problem.

[Version B](#) for a discussion of these effects and strategic response approaches). During this time period, there was significant mainstream coverage presenting CRT fault lines as far-right versus far-left, e.g.:

- **Framing opposition to CRT as a reactionary conservative backlash**, for example [here](#); in [this](#) description of conservative lawmakers on the front lines of an aggressive anti-CRT movement; and in [this](#) characterization of Sean Spicer, noting that Spicer “somehow managed to drag “critical race theory — a Very Sensitive GOP grievance — into the long-winded rant.”
- **Grouping CRT opposition with prominent cultural agendas on the right**, e.g. in [this](#) characterization of conservative reactionary opposition to “everything from ‘critical race theory’ to the supposed cancellation of Dr. Seuss,” and in [this](#) bundling of issues “roiling the school scene” as triggered by parents “opposed to critical race theory, transgender rights, and pandemic policies.”

At the same time, a **quieter and less-polarized discussion emerges**:

- **Surfacing of nuanced approaches and debates**: Is the problem inherent in the academic theory or in rigid, extremified applications? – See, for example, [Anne Applebaum](#), writing in *The Atlantic* on “the swift and merciless mob justice on social codes,” and also making the case that the differences are not fundamentally between “woke” and anti-woke” perspectives, but are based rather on differing interpretations, descriptions, and memories. She writes that “nothing in the academic texts of critical race theory mandates this behavior.” See also within the Jewish community, debate generated by the release of the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values [White Paper](#), a document that focuses on antisemitism as a “reliable consequence of Critical Social Justice ideology,” which [centered](#) on whether the phenomenon cited are attributable to inherent properties of CRT.
- **Potential awakening of a moderate middle** within minority populations: See, for example, “recent coverage suggests that the media is reproaching itself for... neglecting the perspective of more-moderate voters of color” [here](#); and platformed minority voices speaking against aspects of applied CRT in discourse and policy (e.g. [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).
- **Example of a ‘reform approach’**: The California State Legislature [vote](#) to advance a bill that mandates the teaching of ethnic studies for high school graduates signified a qualified relief to mainstream Jewish organizations and activists in the state (see [here](#) and [here](#)), which had fought successfully to oppose a previous version of the proposed curriculum on the basis of its usurping of Jewish and Israeli narratives.

Erasive discourse

Within the past two-week period, several indicators in discourse point to some **measure of growing attention to a prevalent ‘erasure’ of the Jewish experience, identity, and vulnerability in contemporary progressive discourse**. See for example [this](#) review of Dara Horn’s book, *People Love Dead Jews*, and its theme that prevalent narratives on Jews offer “distractions from the main issue, which is the very concrete, specific death of Jews,” often focusing instead on universalizing

lessons. See also [on](#) the upcoming adaptation of David Baddiel's *Jews Don't Count*, which offers a British perspective on dismissal of antisemitism from the left, for American audiences.

Jewish objections to the flattening of Jewish identity into a religion surfaced in different contexts, during this period; notably in [this](#) essay arguing the inapplicability of the term “religious hate crime” that the FBI uses to describe antisemitic acts because of the implication “that antisemitism will magically cease to exist if we stop being religious — but they won’t.... Identity is complex, and the hate minorities face cannot be diminished to one facet of our peoplehood.” In an MPAC-hosted [discussion](#) between Jeremy Ben-Ami and Peter Beinart, in defending Zionism, Ben-Ami spoke of his discomfort with the term “Jewish state,” which he framed as referring to Judaism as a religion, and of his subsequent preference for describing his support for a national home for the Jewish people.

Return to campus

A number of **emerging threats** featured prominently in discourse over this two-week period:

- **Growing attention to a climate threatening to viewpoint diversity on campus:** See for example Steven Pinker's claim that academic discourse is narrowing in this [New York Times](#) interview, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) [report](#) on increased targeting of scholars in this context, and Peter Boghossian's [resignation letter](#) to Portland State University published on Bari Weiss's Substack.
- **Reinforcement of the 'silencing charge,'** which frames Jewish advocacy as oppressive quashing of dissent, e.g. around Fordham University's decision to ban Students for Justice in Palestine on campus (see for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Response approaches appearing in discourse included initiatives:

- **Seeking protection and inclusion on campus**, e.g. calling out universities for not protecting Jewish students even as antisemitism is [increasing](#) on U.S. campuses (see [here](#)); and seeking [inclusion](#) within “an environment of academic integrity, moral clarity, and open dialogue” at CUNY.
- **Addressing the decentralized nature of threat:** see significantly the AJC's new [program](#) to incubate initiatives developed by young Jews for local, national, or virtual impact.

Spotlight on growing influence of American Muslims

The twentieth anniversary of 9/11 included a wave of coverage describing the **growingly influential role of Muslim American since**. See, for example: [here](#) on “the recent rise of many Muslim Americans to positions of power and influence”; on the environment that “drew a new generation of young Muslims to activism, and motivated them to use their voices in political and cultural arenas” in [this](#) feature on influential Muslim Americans; and [here](#) on how 9/11 “made” Rep. Rashida Tlaib.

This increasing political and organizational presence has also platformed and made prominent strong anti-Israel voices, often within progressive movements. See, for example, from this two-

week period: [recently](#) from Rashida Tlaib vilifying Israel for not releasing bodies of women killed while attempting terror attacks, and [platforming](#) Jewish Voices for Peace.

Israeli focus on re-engaging the left

In the background, **discourse prominently framed the increasing, and possibly inexorable in the near-term, influence of progressive movements on the broader U.S. left.** See, for example, [here](#) for a discussion of how “a vigorous wave of progressive activism has helped push the country’s culture to the left,” as part of a realignment of American politics significantly dividing on the basis of education level; and [here](#) on how “a loose set of once-radical ideas about identity, social justice and self-expression has leapt from university campuses to permeate politics and the press, spilling onto the streets and beginning to spread into schools.”

Amidst this background, Jewish media has highlighted the intention of the new Israeli government and key Israeli public figures to promote a reset in relations with the U.S. left, including Jewish communities, (see, for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Still, events during this period highlighted potential upcoming clashes, significantly surrounding President Biden’s [plan](#) to reopen the Jerusalem conflict despite Israeli objections; a move that four Democratic senators that visited Israel notably strongly [promoted](#).