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TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'

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INTRODUCTION

This product summarizes developments that affect the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel communities within the U.S. progressive left. Spanning a two-week period, September 20 – October 3, and relying solely on open-source information, the document covers events and highlights ‘weak signals’ with potential for developing significance.

This product is part of the ‘Grand Pivot of the Pro-Israel Network Project,’ for which the Reut Group received a grant the Genesis Prize as part of “Speak Out for Israel,” a global initiative in honor of 2019 Laureate Robert Kraft to combat anti-Semitism and efforts to delegitimize Israel, both of which are on the rise again in confluence with the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

EXTREMIFYING EXTREMES AND THE CENTER'S FALL-OUT

Dramatic turbulence in the U.S. accelerates a broader trend towards societal and political polarization, in which the center increasingly migrates towards extremes that are increasingly more so. The resulting disequilibrium directly challenges the consensus-driven center that has traditionally anchored the stability of the U.S.-Israel relationship, leaving actors untethered from norms and incentive systems that have bound bi-partisan U.S support for Israel. While the center on Israel remains firm and resilient, 'weak signals' indicating potential shifts, as they have manifested in the past couple of weeks, reflect processes of mainstreaming extremification on the left and right, and a Jewish community increasingly divided along parallel lines.

THE POLARIZING RIGHT

Growing influence of the extremes on the right also affects the positioning of Israel and Jewish communities on the left. If the right were to lose viability as an attractive 'home' for 'swayable' Jews, the leverage generated on the left by the dynamic of a competition for Jewish support would be weakened. Moreover, a desensitization effect of exposure to virulent anti-Semitism, and the breaking of taboos regarding its legitimization in American public life, can hold system-wide implications; when the bounds of discourse are stretched on either side, inhibitory 'shock factor' barriers erode.

ASHKARA¹ NAZIS

Beyond the recent headlines that outraged the Jewish community surrounding Donald Trump's reported [comments](#) that Jewish people are "only in it for themselves" and "stick together," Jewish communities are getting increasingly entangled in debates regarding whether white supremacy and the specter of actual Nazism is becoming a real and tangible threat in America. Indeed, one indicator of Jews [considering](#) anti-Semitism from the extreme right an increasingly serious threat is a recent uptick in Jews, chilled by a climate of rising extremism and anti-Semitism, making [inquiries](#) into international immigration options.

¹ A Hebrew slang term: see [TLV1](#): 'Ashkara' could mean 'totally' or 'literally' in American slang.

White supremacists come out from the fringes to national stage:

- The Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, [pledged](#) allegiance to Donald Trump after he told the group to “stand back and stand by” during the first presidential debate, while founder of the neo-Nazi “Daily Stormer” website Andrew Anglin [said](#) that the remarks represented a clear call to arms. The group, which experienced a significant [uptick](#) in interest following the debate, is a relatively small fringe group; however, a number of similar such groups together may [constitute](#) a potential paramilitary force. ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt expressed shock in a tweet, demanding an apology or explanation from the president. Trump later [said](#) that he condemns all white supremacists, a move Proud Boys leadership [anticipated](#) as calculated to “appease the masses.”
- The Simon Wiesenthal Center [released](#) a [report](#) detailing the origins of the QAnon conspiracy theory and warning about its anti-Semitic nature. The growing prominence of QAnon is also detailed in [this recent report](#), which notes that there will be 24 QAnon candidates on the federal ballot in November. (The House recently [voted](#) overwhelmingly to condemn QAnon, which was identified as a potential domestic terrorist threat, with 17 Republicans and one Independent voting against the resolution, while Senate Republicans blocked a [resolution](#) condemning white supremacy that had passed the House unanimously.)

Kosher stamp for making the comparison:

- The Jewish Democratic Council of America [compared](#) the climate in Trump's America to the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism in 1930s Germany in an [ad](#) targeting Jewish voters in swing states, while a narrator intoned that “history shows us what happens when leaders use hatred and nationalism to divide their people.” While some major Jewish American organizations came out against the ad for trivializing the memory of the Holocaust's victims, JDCA Executive Director Haile Soifer [called on](#) Jewish organizations to concede that “the time for equivocation is over. This is no time to back away from the truth.”
- Joe Biden [compared](#) President Trump to Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels, accusing the president of lying to the American people about the Biden's record.

- Jewish television commentator Donnie Deutsch [compared](#) Trump to Hitler on MSNBC.
- Notably, the ad and the basis for the comparison were [endorsed](#) by prominent Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt and the ADL's former national director and Holocaust survivor Abraham Foxman.

THE POLARIZING LEFT AND THE FUTURE OF THE DEMOCRATIC CENTER ON ISRAEL

As more general political commentary documents the transformation of the Democratic center (see recently [here](#) in the context of local races on how Democrats in New York are increasingly wary of challenges from the left), the past couple weeks have also seen commentary from the progressive left on the impacts of this trend in the Israel context.

- At a recent event, [Peter Beinart](#) spoke of a **future of pro-Israel advocacy that leans right**: With young Jews increasingly polarized on a spectrum that ranges from 'universalistic' to 'tribal' identities, it is the highly tribal and largely Orthodox Jews who will continue to prioritize Israel as a political issue.
- At the same event, Lara Friedman spoke of **progressive shifts in the U.S. political environment**, noting Rep. Eliot Engel's primary loss to Jamaal Bowman despite significant outside spending. Meanwhile, [Alex Kane](#) characterized AOC's withdrawal from the APN event as showcasing the growing influence the Palestinian rights movement has on both the American progressive left and Congress: "Five years ago, it would have been inconceivable for a U.S. politician to bow to pressure from the left, let alone Palestinian activists, to pull out of an event celebrating an Israeli leader. Today, however, the Palestinian rights movement can count on a small bloc of progressive lawmakers who are backing their cause and authoring legislation to condition U.S. military aid to Israel."
- Simultaneously, **the robustness of the pro-Israel center even in the face of signals of potential shifts** was exemplified in a [resolution](#) introduced by Rep. Josh Gottheimer criticizing the Palestinian Authority for payments to terrorists and honoring a woman from his district killed in a suicide bombing, as well as in a bi-partisan [bill](#) sponsored by mostly

Democrats that would provide Israel an effective veto on U.S. arms sales to the Middle East in the interest of protecting Israel's regional QME.

A LINE IN THE SAND FOR THE PROGRESSIVE LEFT? AOC REJECTS THE RABIN LEGACY

After agreeing to appear at an Americans for Peace Now event, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez cancelled following a critical tweet by Alex Kane, a Jewish Currents contributing writer and occasional Mondoweiss contributor. The initial announcement has been [greeted](#) as an indicator of AOC's willingness to engage with some of the more left-leaning elements of the pro-Israel world in Washington, which had not been the [case](#) since she was elected last year. Kane [later quoted](#) a source as saying that that the invitation to Ocasio-Cortez was not framed as a memorial, but as a review of the Oslo peace process. (Keith Ellison, the first Muslim elected to Congress and the former deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee, will [speak](#) at the event.)

AOC's decision represented a willingness to take a clear position, in this case against the Rabin legacy, which is at odds with the American Jewish consensus. AOC was broadly criticized from the mainstream Jewish left for abandoning an organization that is on-the-ground seeking peace, and, in imposing the purity demands of the left on those most struggling with the conflict, shunning solidarity with the Israeli left working for peace (see strong examples [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). On the far progressive Jewish left, exemplified by [these takes](#) from staffers at Jewish Currents, AOC's decision was largely lauded.

THE POLARIZING JEWISH ELECTORATE

[Analysis](#) on Jewish voting pattern notes the stark divide between Jewish Orthodox and other voters. It also notes that rising concern regarding anti-Semitism, primarily as it manifests from the right, may play a growing role in Jewish political affiliation, particularly in hardening disapproval of Donald Trump – as does disapproval of his handling of relations with Israel.

Jewish unity behind Biden coalesced in an enthusiastic [endorsement](#) that more than 100 Jewish leaders and officials issued, which focused on the issues of Israel and anti-Semitism, accusing Trump of “fanning the flames of hatred, extremism, and anti-Semitism” and converting “legitimate concerns about anti-Semitism into political weapons designed to create rifts within

our own community.” Democratic Majority for Israel’s first general election [ad](#), which targeted Jewish voters in key battleground states, also emphasized Biden’s consistent support for Israel.

On the right, the competition for Jewish votes seeks to amplify the specter of ‘the Squad’ representing the future of Democratic foreign policy, and to leverage the Israeli-Arab Accords (see for example [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). However, reports downplaying the impact of the Accords on Jewish voters (see [here](#) for example) focus on its failure to account for the diversity of issues Jews are voting on – with Israel not emerging as a distinct priority – especially in this election.

Underlining the role that money plays in making the divide tangible, [Ron Kampeas](#) notes that fifteen of the top 25 biggest political donors this cycle are Jewish or of Jewish origin (up to date as of September 8). Notably on the right are Sheldon and Miriam Adelson and Bernie Marcus; on the left, Michael Bloomberg, Tom Steyer, and George Soros. Among the top 25 Jewish donors, the money contributed to Democratic campaigns totals approximately five times more than that donated to Republican campaigns.

A tale of two disparate information ecosystems – Differing takes on a recent legislative initiative reflected the vulnerability of Jews to being used as a political football. It also drove home the reality of the virtually entirely disparate information ecosystems in which the Jewish political right and left are immersed.

The turn of [events](#) started when Republicans introduced a motion to recommit to attach language concerning anti-Semitism to the proposed Equity and Exclusion Enforcement Act. The motion was framed as superfluous by Democrats given Trump's Executive Order reinforcing that Title VI covers anti-Semitism as discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Therefore, given the perception that the language was unnecessary and the fact that historically, the majority party nearly always votes down motions to recommit on principle by overwhelming margins, many Democrats voted against its inclusion. After the motion passed anyway, the bill was voted on – every Democrat voted in favor and all but three Republicans voted against.

Following these events, 22 of the 26 Jewish Democratic members of the House signed a [letter](#) urging House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy to stop exploiting anti-Semitism for partisan ends, emphasizing that “Jews are not a political football, and to treat Jews as such devalues Jewish

lives and makes it more difficult to fight the dangerous and deadly trends of growing anti-Semitism.”

In the fall-out, information sources on the [right framed](#) the story with such headlines as: “[162 House Dems Vote Against Measure to Combat Anti-Semitism](#),” “[70 Percent of House Democrats Vote Against Anti-Semitism Measure](#),” and “[Anti-Semitism Clearly Isn't a Priority for the House](#).” The stark divide evident in the creation of a major story in right-wing media, and its surfacing in left and mainstream news sources only as a reaction to the right’s framing of events, reflects growing polarization that is also characterizing U.S. Jewish communities.

SEEKING CLARITY ON IDENTITY AND DEFINITIONS

Identity politics-based framing dominating societal and political discourse meets an American Jewish community struggling for internal and external clarity on its identity as it relates to contemporary contexts and dominant racial and class constructs. **This extends to ambiguity and ambivalence on defining anti-Semitism** and understanding Jewish vulnerability in terms that do not always align with dominant notions of privilege: an issue that is now reaching a critical peak, with its emergence in the past couple of weeks notable in social media and in campus spheres.

IDENTITY ISSUES

In the absence of a sufficiently comprehensive and conscious conversation dealing with Jewish identity today, a vacuum is increasingly filled by narratives that frame Jews alongside white, privileged oppressors. The past couple weeks have seen a number of forays into Jewish conversations that openly address the subject:

- An intellectual assertion of the authenticity of Jewish identity and the reality of Jews as victims of prejudice in the face of “[erasive anti-Semitism](#).”
- Explaining Judaism as a multitude of ethnicities and nationalities, as opposed to ‘just’ a religion: for example in the groups fighting California’s ethnic studies bill on the [basis](#) that

the proposed curriculum did not include Middle Eastern Jews in its lesson options, and also [here](#) and [here](#).

- Discussions about the mismatch between current scientific understandings of race versus social, political and economic constructs that govern our perception thereof, in the context of the Jewish experience, for example [here](#).
- Pushing back against the framing of Jews as part of a 'privileged' white monolith – For example, at Midwestern State University when a professor [expressed](#) his disapproval on social media of the university's Black Student Union, which he accused of erasing the Jewish experience by labeling Jews as 'privileged.' (The BSU released a statement taking offense at what they framed as an accusation of anti-Semitism, as well as with the implication that a person cannot be Jewish and Black at the same time.)
- The death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg – the first woman and Jewish person to [lie](#) in state at the U.S. Capitol – provided a Jewish context in diverse displays of national mourning, and opportunities to discuss Jewish identities in American life: see for example [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).
- Paradoxically, as Black communities discuss the imperative of owning their historical narrative in regard to the legacy of slavery, there have been a couple of examples in recent weeks that point to the Jewish community and the Holocaust as exemplars in this respect, see [here](#) and [here](#).

DEFINITION ISSUES

Agreed-upon definitions can be a critical tool for effectively calling out anti-Semitism, and fighting with a clarity that in today's context is often obstructed by an automatic defensiveness and accompanying feeling of lack of legitimacy in staking claims of unfair treatment. Over the past two-week period, controversy emerging from a lack of clarity on what constitutes anti-Semitism was exemplified in social media, where the issue of online anti-Semitism grows alongside growing awareness of the definitive influence of the platforms over lives. It also manifested in the campus arenas – ground zero for the BDS movement, and where the issue of

defining anti-Semitism in relation to campaigns that single out and demonize Israel, or that hold Jews collectively responsible for Israeli government policies, is consistently played out.

On campus:

- New York University recently reached an [agreement](#) with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights following a complaint filed on behalf of an NYU student regarding instances of antisemitic activity on the campus. The settlement includes a commitment by NYU to use the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism in identifying and combating anti-Semitism. The agreement is the first resolution at an American university since an executive order signed by Donald Trump added anti-Semitism to the list of forms of discrimination prohibited by Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.
- Fordham University is currently [in court](#), defending a decision taken by the Dean of Students not to recognize Students for Justice in Palestine, "an organization whose sole purpose is advocating political goals of a specific group, and against a specific country." StandWithUs recently filed an amicus brief supporting the university on the grounds that SJP "regularly demonizes the State of Israel and denies Jews the right to self-determination, including through substantially disruptive conduct targeting Jewish and pro-Israel students."
- The Columbia University student body [voted](#) on and approved a first-ever BDS referendum. An ad that ran as part of a Jewish group's campaign against the referendum (one [version](#) of which read, "CUAD's BDS REFERENDUM IS JEW HATRED. Vote NO to hate! Vote NO to keep Jewish students safe on campus!") was condemned and removed. Columbia's President expressed his [opposition](#) to the referendum and promised that it would not affect the institution's investment policies.
- The student government at the University of Illinois-Urbana approved an SJP-authored BDS resolution, which also [called](#) for one student representative from Students for Justice in Palestine to participate in a university task force "charged with divesting from corporations and index funds that violate human rights and reinvest in socially and environmentally responsible companies and index funds." University chancellor Robert

Jones previously said “the campus and the entire university system are on record in opposition to any boycott of Israeli academic institutions and have opposed divestment measures here in the past.”

On social media:

- The vulnerability of social media platforms to anti-Semitic content is precipitating discussions on regulations that hinge on defining anti-Semitism. A bi-partisan group in the House recently [announced](#) the launch of an inter-parliamentary task force to combat online anti-Semitism tasked with “establishing consistent messaging and policy from legislatures around the world in order to hold social media platforms, including Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Google, accountable.” Meanwhile, fifty-six academics [issued](#) a joint letter urging Facebook not to adopt the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism on the basis of its lack of clarity and vulnerability to being used as a political tool to silence criticism of Israel.
- Growing attention to coverage of anti-Semitism on social media, including on [TikTok](#), on which commonly cited forms center on denying the existence or the severity of the Holocaust, and holding Jews responsible for the actions of the government of Israel. TikTok has said it doesn't tolerate “hate in any form,” including anti-Semitism.
- Zoom canceled a [webinar](#) featuring Leila Khaled, which was widely denounced by Jewish and pro-Israel groups, and YouTube and Facebook took down the live stream, citing violation of policy relating to the PFLP as a dangerous, or U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization. Jewish groups that pressured the platforms [declared](#) the cancellation a victory for the idea that ‘Big Tech’ has the right and responsibility to limit speech on its platforms; in contrast, where covered, the cancellation was [framed](#) broadly on the left outside of Jewish media as resulting from pressure by Israeli and Jewish lobby groups, and criticized by a number of rights’ groups (see for example [here](#) and [here](#)).
- A growing trend of [fabricated news](#) aimed at sowing division and hate in America also traffics in anti-Semitic commentary and in false attributions of anti-Semitic activity, including through blaming Black communities.

BLACK-JEWISH RELATIONS: MORE CONTINUITY THAN DISRUPTION

Coverage in recent weeks suggest little traction gained by efforts that seek to pit Black people and the broader anti-racism struggle against Jewish people and support for Israel. Indeed, the high level of focus of the current social justice struggle specifically on systemic racism against Black people does not seem to encompass sufficient bandwidth to simultaneously showcase piggybacking causes. In the background, a wave of initiatives that promote Black-Jewish engagement provide grounding for positive momentum on people-to-people as well as institutional levels.

ATTEMPTS TO PIT JEWISH SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL AGAINST THE ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLE

While the peaking anti-racist struggle in the months following George Floyd’s killing has by-and-large been absent an accompanying emphasis on anti-Israel themes that often characterizes intersectional campaigns (see Reut’s paper analyzing this phenomenon [here](#)), in the past couple weeks several attempts to incorporate such an emphasis have surfaced.

- The University of Illinois student government divestment call was [bundled](#) as part of a resolution in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. An Office of Student Affairs statement signed by the university chancellor Robert Jones stated that, “It is unfortunate that a resolution before the group tonight was designed to force students who oppose efforts to divest from Israel to also vote against support for the Black Lives Matter movement.” The campus Hillel called it “an attempt to paint Israel and Jews as the obstacle to racial equity, amidst the holiest time in the Jewish calendar.”
- At Cornell University, a faculty-student [letter](#) calling for an “anti-racist Cornell” demanded, among other things, that the university address Cornell’s institutional partnership with Technion Israeli Institute of Technology given the military occupation of Palestine.

- A recent [conversation](#) on “Anti-Semitism and Black Culture” on the private social app Clubhouse and involving hundreds of listeners, which took place on Yom Kippur, at times devolved into commentary about Jewish ‘enslavement of the Black community’ and the IDF training of American police that kill Black kids. Critics charged that it [featured](#) non-Jews redefining anti-Semitism and accusations that Jews are weaponizing anti-Semitism.

MULTITUDE OF INITIATIVES ON BLACK-JEWISH RELATIONS

Jewish-Black engagement continues on multiple levels; notably in the past two weeks, in: internal Jewish initiatives promoting solidarity, such as widely shared sermons [here](#) and [here](#) and this multi-media museum [series](#) on Black lives in a Jewish context; events bringing home the extent of the shared threat posed by white supremacy, such as [here](#), and examples of Jewish and Black unity fighting against white supremacy, such as in this [editorial](#); solidarity in action, including through standing with BLM activists, such as in a local Jewish community [here](#), and in this personal take on the imperative of Jewish anti-racist activism [here](#); and initiatives to deepen engagement, such as this [Shabbat](#) experience bringing together Black Jews and non-Jewish Blacks, this interfaith [dialogue](#), and this solidarity [music video](#) that 100 Jewish cantors and Black ministers released.

Recent weeks have also seen high visibility of Jews of Color, including through deliberate focuses on their experience (see, for example [here](#)); a more urgent call to create systemic change to promote inclusiveness of Jews of Color, such as [here](#) and in this ‘[al-cheit](#) for white Jews’; and spotlights on famous Jews of Color such as [Lenny Kravitz](#), [Tracee Ellis Ross](#), and [Sunny Hostin](#).

Interestingly, and possibly reflecting a growing perception of Jewish relevance on social and racial justice today, Bend the Arc – described as a “progressive Jewish organization” – was quoted on the topic of the role of racism in the presidential debate in a [Vox](#) piece on the subject.

