

# ERASIVE ANTI-SEMITISM

## A NEW THREAT ARISING WITHIN CONTEMPORARY PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE

Policy Paper – Version A

MARCH 10, 2021

---

THE REUT GROUP

Lead Writer: Daphna Kaufman

Reut Team: Eran Shayshon, Adi Levy



קבוצת ראות  
Reut Group

Initiated & Commissioned by the Julis Foundation for Multi-Disciplinary Thinking

---

# CONTENT

<b>TACHLES</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRO: EMERGING NEW FORM OF ANTI-SEMITISM</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>THE CORE CONCEPTUAL MISMATCH</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Narrative confiscation and rejection of self-defining agency .....	8
<b>SUGGESTED APPROACH</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Seizing today’s opportunities .....	10
A battle of ideas: Expanding understanding of anti-Semitism to include ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ .....	11
Consensus-building imperative .....	12
Central role of decentralized progressive Jewish engagement .....	12
<b>ANNEX: Key background conceptual tensions</b> .....	<b>13</b>

---

# TACHLES

1. **Jewish communities worldwide are increasingly attuned in recent years to challenges posed by anti-Semitism that emanates from progressive movements.**<sup>1</sup> In the past decade, the assault in Israel's legitimacy from the left has attracted the lion's share of attention, and mobilized in response a robust coordinated global effort, led by Jewish communities and the State of Israel, to combat delegitimization on every front, from international fora to university campuses.
2. **The purpose of this paper is to offer a more accurate description of an increasingly prevalent and different strain of progressive anti-Semitism** that has not been robustly named or defined, and which the abovementioned global coordinated effort does not directly address.
3. **The concept of 'erasive anti-Semitism'**<sup>2</sup> refers to a *de-facto* undermining of Jewish narrative self-determination. It negates the rights of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identity, experience, and vulnerability. It is largely an unintended consequence of contemporary progressive discourse.
4. **'Erasive anti-Semitism' stems from a conceptual mismatch: Dominant conceptual categories that form bases of progressive worldviews** – expressed in, for example, prevalent terminology, symbols, values, patterns of behavior, and priorities – **can fail to capture, or actively distort, the historic and lived Jewish experience.** Jews are cast uniformly as powerful white oppressors.
5. **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.** Its main disseminators are not anti-Semites, despite engaging in acts of 'erasive anti-Semitism.' **Contrary to common forms of discrimination, this strain does not rely on singling Jews out, ethnically or otherwise, as distinct categories.** Rather, it indiscriminately lumps them within the dominant majorities it delineates. This effectively creates an erasure, diminishing the Jewish voice in defining Jewish identity.
6. **At the same time, there is a marginal fringe that purposefully advances anti-Jewish and anti-Israel agendas utilizing its tenets, and continues to amass influence on the left.** They are able to exploit contemporary progressive paradigms to challenge Jewish inclusion on the left and support for Jewish and pro-Israel agendas on the left.

---

<sup>1</sup> Context: Trajectory of progressive ascendance on the U.S. left – Broader decentralization, polarization, and growth of anti-establishment sentiment have contributed to a steady rise in the influence of progressive politics. This growth has been turbo-charged in the Trump era. Effects can be seen in the increasing presence and agenda-setting influence of progressive politicians, notable in Congress; and in a growing ecosystem of progressive start-up policy, activism, and advocacy groups generating an alternative information and knowledge infrastructure.

There is also potential for heightened progressive influence on Jewish and pro-Israel agendas – Foreign policy is a declining priority agenda item on the left; in parallel, Israel is a declining Jewish grassroots priority. Furthermore, an aging Democratic Party is transforming generationally; thus, increasingly initiating leadership that brings progressive concepts and priorities to the fore.

<sup>2</sup> 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. This 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.

- 
7. **Effects can be seen when Jewish identities and agendas are challenged within, and excluded from, progressive movements and discourse.** Such events often surround Jewish identification with, or failure to renounce, Zionism. They are increasingly felt when Jewish claims to experienced anti-Semitism are delegitimized or minimized. They are prevalent in instances in which the exclusivity of the right of Jews to define their identity, vulnerability, and experience is undermined or usurped. They occur on individual and communal levels, and in aspersions cast on the mainstream Jewish organizations and institutions.
  8. **This form of discrimination, hostility, or prejudice manifests under the radar of society-at-large, and Jewish communities are largely unable to generate a cohesive and united front against it.** Identity politics-based framing has met 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. Thus, efforts to understand and contain the threat ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ poses to the positioning of pro-Israel and Jewish communities on the political left, to the cohesion and the political efficacy of the Jewish community, and thus also to Israel’s bi-partisan status, remain piecemeal and lack a coherent conceptual grounding.
  9. Moreover, **dividing Jews on the basis of progressive conceptual categories undermines Jewish self-perception as a collective and the notion of Jewish peoplehood.** Doing so generates rancor within Jewish communities, exacerbates tensions around the role of race within Jewish communities, and threatens the basis of connection between world Jewry and Israel.
  10. **The challenge of the Jewish community is to reach a broadly consensual definition on what constitutes ‘erasive anti-Semitism.’** This is particularly critical in order to build a wide Jewish tent against it. Progressive Jewish communities on the front lines of this issue are natural leaders of such an effort.

## INTRO: EMERGING NEW FORM OF ANTI-SEMITISM

1. **‘Traditional’ or ‘classic’ anti-Semitism, characterized by overt and often violent hostility towards Jews, materializes today predominantly on the political right wing and in radical Islam.** Common classic anti-Semitic tropes revolve around such themes as blood libel, Holocaust denial, and claims of inherent Jewish greed.
2. **In recent years, Jewish and pro-Israel communities have had to significantly adapt to focus in parallel on anti-Semitism emanating from the left, and specifically on its manifestations in campaigns to delegitimize Israel.**<sup>3</sup>
3. Unlike many forms of anti-Semitism that emerge on the extreme political right or radical Islam, **acts of hostility, discrimination, or prejudice against Jews from the progressive left are not generally blatant or violent; instead, often subtle and unwitting.** Indeed, ‘classic’ anti-Semitism is more easily acknowledged and condemned within mainstream political and social discourse.

---

<sup>3</sup> The focus of this phenomenon is on the negation of Israel’s right to exist or of the right of the Jewish people to self-determination based on philosophical or political arguments. Delegitimization is promoted by a relatively small number of anti-Zionist organizations who have managed to generate a “long tail” of progressive support. By hiding their anti-Zionist ideological agenda through the use of human rights language to negatively brand Israel, radical left organizations have managed to garner support from progressive circles and occasionally harness them unwittingly to “acts of delegitimization,” with the notable example of the boycott campaign.

- 
4. Thus, though they pose a complex challenge to the Jewish community, **Jewish community relations organizations and professionals are attuned to the dynamic and structure of delegitimization campaigns** and tirelessly work to drive a wedge between those who undermine Israel's right to exist, and critics of Israeli policy.
  11. Indeed, coordinated global efforts to combat delegitimization on every front have resulted in several meaningful successes. **Campaigns to promote the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Anti-Semitism** are notable in this context because this definition explicates forms of anti-Zionist anti-Semitism from the left.<sup>4</sup>
  5. **The extremity and turbulence of the political and social climate over the past few years is accelerating the evolution of a strain of anti-Semitism directly tied to key progressive concepts that are becoming increasingly dominant in discourse on the left.**<sup>5</sup> Unlike delegitimization campaigns – in which the dominant explicit target is Israel – in the context of this new form of 'erasive anti-Semitism,' Jewish communities and their positioning on the left and in larger society are also directly impacted.

## 'Erasive Anti-Semitism'

6. **'Erasive anti-Semitism,' negates the right of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identity, experience, and vulnerability in relation to changing social contexts.** Progressive ideological paradigms and conceptual frameworks lend themselves to effectively silencing Jewish voices on self-defining, on claiming vulnerability, and in pursuing Jewish agendas. At friction points, Jewish communities' self-perception, assessment, or agendas may be devalued or delegitimized.
7. **'Erasive anti-Semitism' fundamentally threatens the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel communities on the U.S. left, and thus the delicate equilibrium of bi-partisan political support for Jewish and pro-Israel agendas.** The urgency of clearly characterizing and contending with the kinds of anti-Semitism that emanates from progressive movements bears emphasis because the threat is overshadowed in a climate of far more direct and discernable hatred towards Jews, and because its identification is far more evasive.
8. **'Erasive anti-Semitism' is characterized by:**
  - **Denying Jews and Jewish communities the right to self-define and to represent their own narrative** and instead externally imposing definitions, such as characterizing Jews ethnically as white European, and as one-dimensionally 'privileged.' The unique historic persecution and continuous vulnerability of the Jewish People are erased of significance.
  - **Blaming Jews for the current discriminatory social power structure that the progressive movement is fighting against** – More or less extreme allusions to Jewish power feed a conception of Jews as disproportionately responsible for oppressive power structures.
  - **Thus, neutralizing Jewish voices on Jewish and pro-Israel agendas** – The narrative confiscation can challenge the legitimacy of Jewish advocacy for individual or collective

---

4 The IHRA definition includes discrimination: Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor; applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation; drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis; and holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

5 In discussing Jewish and pro-Israel positioning within progressive politics, this paper primarily highlights the influence of identity politics in today's progressive movements. Identity politics builds on and encompasses a number of conceptual progressive underpinning, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, neo-Marxism, and critical race theory. It prioritizes validation groups upon whom society has conferred, on the basis of their immutable characteristics, systemic disadvantage.

---

Jewish security and against discrimination. Within progressive frameworks, Jewish organizations and individuals, implicitly or explicitly, can be expected, by acknowledging their privilege and power status, to renounce claims of prejudice, discrimination, or insecurity experienced individually or collectively. Tensions have long surfaced surrounding Jewish roles in defending Israel from campaigns attacking the fundamental legitimacy of the Jewish state, and are more recently increasingly reflected in challenges Jews face in voicing their experience of anti-Semitism on the left.

9. Due largely to the pervasiveness of the conceptual infrastructure it rests on, **‘erasive anti-Semitism’ remains comfortably under the radar of threat assessments, and has failed to generate a cohesive and united front of Jewish and pro-Israel communities that stand against it.**
10. This ambiguity persists despite growing indications that **contending with the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel agendas within dominant contemporary progressive discourse is a defining battle.** The threat is conceptual, fundamental, and systemic; relevant responses must be as well. A first step is understanding why and how central concepts in a broader progressive conceptual infrastructure, when applied uniformly to Jewish contexts, can lend themselves in practice to anti-Semitic hostility, discrimination, or prejudice.
11. In this context, **this paper aspires to contribute to broader Jewish and pro-Israel communal efforts to characterize and map the ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ threat, and to offer initial strategic guidelines** for response.

## THE CORE CONCEPTUAL MISMATCH

12. **The relative ease with which ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ can enter the mainstream stems from a compounding dynamic between two of its effects.** Progressive ‘conceptual categories’ lend themselves to framing Jews as an oppressive power, which those advancing this form of hostility, bias, or discrimination can exploit. At the same time, Jews are obstructed from entering the conversation to challenge that frame’s dominance; **the nature of the frame itself, designating Jewish power, confers an invalidation of Jewish claims on framing the Jewish narrative, on self-defining, within and beyond these constructs,** generating a silent opposition.
13. **Contemporary progressive discourse often employs binary sets of such ‘conceptual categories,’ which guide how societal groups, including Jews, are viewed. Dominant categorizations in this context center on class-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.**
14. **Navigating these dominant conceptual categories, Jews lose out** – boxed in based on skin color and socio-economic privilege, there is little room to accommodate that the nature of collective Jewish vulnerability is unique and tracks differently from other dominant experiences of oppression.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the often-one-dimensional story of American Jews within progressive paradigms is one of power and privilege.
15. **Moreover, progressive conceptual categories, when applied to the Jewish national collective, amplify the framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as one dominated**

---

<sup>6</sup> A ‘Jewish exceptionalism’ refers to the paradox generated by the story of the exceptional rises and exceptional falls of a people at once uniquely marked by historic hatred and persecution directed towards them, and still continuously rising to positions of societal advantage and impact.

---

**by a racially privileged white oppressor.** They are used to invalidate Jewish voices and specifically in the frequent expectation that Jews renounce support for Israel or Zionism as a basis for progressive allyship and inclusion.

16. **Dominant conceptual categories in this context include:**

- **Class based: Oppressor vs. oppressed** – Class-based societal categories are dominantly framed in language that pits ‘oppressed’ against ‘oppressor.’ **Jews tend to fall squarely within the oppressor category as complicit with the status quo, and identifiable by contemporary degree of economic and social advantage.** The notion of Jews as uniquely an oppressor reverberates historically, as does that of the illegitimacy of Jewish influence on institutions. Conspiracy theory-based anti-Semitism, in both left- and right-wing forms, advances a perceived illegitimate seizure of privilege by Jews, presented as all-powerful controllers of dominant institutions.

**The categorization of Jews as an oppressor extends to demonization of Israel as an inherently oppressive system and thus fundamentally flawed.** It delegitimizes substantive engagement, even with the mainstream Israeli left; and strengthens Israeli camps that claim that no potential change within the current Israeli system is relevant to Israel’s legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

- **Skin color-based: White vs. People of Color** – Skin color-based societal categories that divide between white people and People of Color are a pillar of identity politics, in which skin color, based on its immutability, is a more salient component of identity than any given policy preference and represents a key criterion for inclusion in identity political spheres.

**Skin color-based conceptual categorizations give rise to the concept of societal ‘privilege,’** which foremost describes unearned advantages gained by virtue of being white. Acknowledging privilege often means renouncing an assumed right to define or take ownership of a conversation. Frequently, designation as privileged delegitimizes grievances and justifies exclusion from social change agendas.

**By virtue of Jews being perceived as white people of European descent, Jews are conceptually categorized as white privileged,**<sup>8</sup> equating advantages that Jews have gained when ‘accepted’ as white, with natural membership and lived experience. Indeed, the **designation of Jewish identity as white fails to account for pervasive anti-Semitism** and Jewish exclusion from dominant social systems, including its contemporary manifestations, and historic genocidal oppression of the Jewish people, which have frequently been rooted in the perception of Jews as non-white.

**Skin-color dominated categorization has sometimes meant Jewish exclusion from powerful intersectional modes of social justice organizing, rising on the progressive left.**<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Notably in 2020, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s decisions around withdrawing from an Americans for Peace Now event honoring the legacy of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin represented a willingness to take a clear position at odds with the American Jewish consensus and with the Israeli left. 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](#)).

<sup>8</sup> See a recent anecdote from the University of Pennsylvania, where “students in a mandatory class on racism were given a ‘[privilege quiz](#)’ by the professor. Next to each identity, the quiz listed a positive or negative value. The higher the value of the identity, the more the students needed to “check their privilege” according to the professor. Under the religion category, Judaism was ranked as the most privileged of all, with 25 points assigned.” See [also](#) controversial language from California’s Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) discussing Jewish “conditional whiteness and privilege.”

<sup>9</sup> The Ferguson Riots (2014) shaped the anti-racist struggle within the framework of intersectionality. Jews and Jewish groups found themselves excluded and denied the legitimacy to identify as a collective with

---

It has also supported framings of **Israel as an ethno-national supremacist project**, pitting its defenders against coalitions for racial justice.<sup>10</sup>

- **Theory-of-change based: Radical, rejection based vs. incremental reform** – Dominant strains within progressive movements favor the radical over the incremental as an approach to social change, sometimes to the extent that incremental approaches are framed as ideologically adversarial. Radical approaches are based in an assumption that the status quo is inherently flawed and corrupt. Thus, they reject institutional influence; being free of its conceptual bonds is being 'woke.' An all-or-nothing sensibility underlies the proliferation of 'cancellation' events, which enforce rigid discourse boundaries.

**To the extent that Jews are associated with institutional power and influence, Jews can be framed as obstacles to social justice** by social change movements that aim at elimination of institutions in their current forms. Thus, Jewish power-centered conspiracy theories, and their echoes that spread on both sides of the ideological maps and state or imply Jewish control of key societal institutions, contribute to susceptibility to demonizing Jewish influence and mistrusting Jewish allyship.

**There is an inherent tension between radical approaches and the reality of a Jewish stake in the status quo and current power structures** - While Jews have faced a long road of discriminatory political, social, economic, and academic exclusion, the Jewish trajectory towards inclusion in the U.S. is a product of reform within these structures. Jews have steadily grown in contributory participation across key institutions of American society.

## Narrative confiscation and rejection of self-defining agency

17. **Key effect: Delegitimizing Jewish and pro-Israel agendas.** The framing of Jews as a white oppressor and as a perpetrator of an unjust status quo by current dominant progressive

---

other oppressed groups. See Reut's policy paper on the anti-racist struggle in relation to pro-Israel communities [here](#).

<sup>10</sup> E.g., see examples [here](#) and:

- A dominant theme in progressive framing of [controversy](#) around Israel's responsibility for Palestinian vaccinations (see most recently [around](#) an SNL skit implying an Israeli 'Jewish only' vaccination policy, reinforcing framings of Israel as an ethno-nationalist power, on the basis of demonstrably false assertions). Rashida Tlaib [called](#) it proof that Israel is a 'racist, apartheid state,' which Jamaal Bowman [echoed](#) when, referring to Israel's announcement of its provision of 5,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, he drew a parallel "as a Black man living in American, I know the feeling of being neglected by my government and society..." (Bowman had [removed](#) a previous tweet criticizing Israel's vaccine policy.) (See in Reut's Trend Detector [here](#).)
- History professor and Jewish Voice for Peace [panelist](#) Barbara Ransby [addressing](#) Ali Abunimah: "You argue that defending Israel's right to exist is to acknowledge the racism toward the Palestinians, which is, you know, incorporated into Israeli policy so intricately. So it's an anti-racist issue, it's an anti-colonial issue."
- Instances of anti-Israel groups hijacking broader progressive agendas within [intersectional](#) mobilizations for Black anti-racist struggles: for example, this National Students for Justice in Palestine [statement](#) 'Palestinian Day of Rage' [rally](#) included some participants marching under Black Lives Matters slogans, enabling interested parties from opposite directions to frame the event as an example of Black Lives Matter in support of the Palestinian cause.
- Campaigns such as [Deadly Exchange](#), which frame Israel as supporting and enabling white oppression in the U.S, make the direct link between race dynamics in each. Recently, the Tufts University student body [passed](#) a referendum that connects Israel to police violence carried out by the campus police department, and [calls](#) for the university to apologize for having its former police chief participate in a security training program in Israel.

---

conceptual categories is used in silencing and delegitimizing tactics. These diminish Jewish agency on Jewish and pro-Israel issues. It is used to disenfranchise Jews from representing their own narrative and deny Jews a right to self-define<sup>11</sup> that is a core demand afforded societal groups with narratives and histories marginalized within the status quo.

18. Byproducts that influence Jewish positioning within progressive movements include prominently:
- **Exclusion from intersectional coalitions and social justice agendas** – Jewish individuals and organizations seeking to ally while maintaining their self-defined Jewish identities implicitly and explicitly rejected from campaigns and conversations on social justice issues.<sup>12</sup>
  - **‘Stifling speech’ charges** – Accusations, insinuations, and implications of Jewish power deployed to silence truth on its agendas, notably by buying influence or by ‘weaponizing’ anti-Semitism.<sup>13</sup> Aligned campaigns to discredit Jewish influence also contribute to a ‘chilling effect’ of self-censoring Jewish-related perspectives and grievances.
  - **Expectation to renounce claims of discrimination** – Participation in progressive movements often requires of Jews and Jewish communal organizations to acknowledge their privilege and power status and to withhold any claims of prejudice, discrimination, or insecurity experienced individually or collectively, as communities and in the context of the Jewish state. This becomes a background for denying the Jewish right to self-determination, and holding all Jews responsible for the ‘original sin’ of Zionism.

---

<sup>11</sup> E.g. as recently exemplified in: controversies sparked by a Jewish Voices for Peace panel convened on anti-Semitism featuring non-Jews and Peter Beinart, a New York Times piece on rejecting Hanukkah that was written by someone who does not identify as Jewish, and a battle to represent Judaism as a multitude of ethnicities and nationalities in fighting California’s ethnic studies bill on the basis that the proposed curriculum did not include Middle Eastern Jews in its lesson options.

Outside arbiters are often legitimized in defining the categories Jews belong in: notable in this context, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s New York Times column evaluating whether a Jew is ethically compelled to identify as white, and concluding that “it is not up to us as individuals to determine the meaning of our racial terms.” He provides the context of contemporary Jewish life in the U.S. to underscore the point that, “being white is not just a matter of identifying as white; it involves being treated as white.” Also, this assessment of Jews’ lived experiences in an article on ‘How Irish, Jewish, and Italian New Yorkers Benefitted from Their Whiteness in Post-World War 2’ labels Jews as white privileged on the basis that they benefitted while post-war boom color lines were drawn, and “were often the ones drawing the lines.”

<sup>12</sup> In a recent example, the suggestion of an Illinois Student Government senator that a Jewish student could be allowed on the committee but could not be affiliated with a Jewish organization like Chabad or Hillel. A faculty member was present and said nothing. For background on intersectionality in the context of Jewish and pro-Israel positioning, see Reut’s policy paper here.

<sup>13</sup> For example: the December 2020 Jewish Voice for Peace panel on anti-Semitism to “explore how to fight back against antisemitism and against those that seek to wield charges of antisemitism to undermine progressive movements for justice”; the ‘Drop the ADL’ campaign waged on also on grounds that the ADL is attacking social justice movements; and Public Affairs Council Salam Al-Maryati’s accusation that “the ADL, along with other pro-Israel groups, has weaponized anti-Semitism to marginalize those who criticize Israel...”

---

# SUGGESTED APPROACH

19. **The goal: To assert boundaries that delegitimize expressions of ‘erasive anti-Semitism,’ securing the legitimacy of Jewish voices as a group empowered to define its own experience, including its collective and individual vulnerability.**

## Seizing today’s opportunities

20. **A growing recognition of the issue is ushering in vigorous debates about how and whether Jews fit into dominant progressive conceptual categories in Jewish communities.** A necessary Jewish dialogue is centering on topics of whether the Jewish story is safely represented as white and privileged,<sup>14</sup> considering concepts of ethnicity, indigeneity,<sup>15</sup> and the nature of Jewish vulnerability.<sup>16</sup> The conversations occur within the Jewish left and the Jewish progressive left. They are often exposing tensions within Jewish communities with Jews of Color. Still, they represent a basis for beginning to cultivate a discourse on this issue, and in doing so confronting fundamentals of contemporary progressive conceptual frameworks.
21. **Confronting contemporary progressive conceptual frameworks is an opportunity to fundamentally re-shape Jewish positioning** in progressive thought and contribute to a more inclusive progressive movement. In parallel, the left is more broadly undergoing a period of fundamental questioning, with ideological positioning within in flux, heightening in the context of a new administration and fluctuating power dynamics between progressive and moderate wings. This provides an opening for **thoughtful Jewish leadership to proactively impact upon the rules of the game.**

---

<sup>14</sup> Jewish viewpoints reflect a broad range of perspectives, for example: one characterizes the notion of contemporary Jewish vulnerability as illogical given that “the lived experience of most Jews in America today is not one of being discriminated against, of being attacked by police.” Another explores the inadequacy of the reigning categories in capturing ‘Jewish particularism’: “We don’t fit into ‘oppressor’ or ‘oppressed’ categories. We are both privileged and marginalized, protected by those in power and yet targeted by the same racist lunatics as those who target people of color.” Active discussions thrive in this area in growing number of memes and discussions on social media and in Jewish Facebook communities.

<sup>15</sup> Such debates have broken into the mainstream in several instances, for example positing Jewish Middle Eastern roots as the rationale for why Jews should not be lumped into the “white” category (for example here), and following Gal Gadot’s announcement that she would be playing Cleopatra in an upcoming movie (for example, here and here – “Gal Gadot is not a white woman. Nor are Ashkenazi Jews writ large. Gadot is Levantine-Middle Eastern, ethnically as well as nationally, as are all Ashkenazi Jews”).

Within Jewish communities, additional questions are arising regarding whether Jews of recent MENA heritage and Jews of Color justify inclusion into minority status (an approach exemplified in the influential role that JIMENA, representing California’s Mizrahi, or Middle Eastern Jewish communities, played in achieving ESMC reform, and described elsewhere critically in recent weeks here and here) to the exclusion of Ashkenazi Jews. (See more in Reut’s Trend Monitor #10 here.)

<sup>16</sup> These come to the fore in particular in questioning whether the nature of Jewish vulnerability and the extreme paradoxes within constitute a Jewish exceptionality, such as around comparing other experiences of oppression and persecution to the Holocaust. The theoretical question has strategic implications: Evident strongly among young American Jews, in this case born after 1980, an aversion to the notion that “there is a distinction between Jews and anybody else” underlies, for example the fact that only 54 percent feel “comfortable with the idea of a Jewish state.”

- 
22. **A new administration ushering in a new political dynamic is also an opportunity to confront strains of progressive-anti-Semitism decisively with the left.**<sup>17</sup> If strains of progressive anti-Semitism are rejected within the Democratic Party and by its leadership, the credibility of the rejection gains validity and robustness.<sup>18</sup>

## A battle of ideas: Expanding understanding of anti-Semitism to include ‘erasive anti-Semitism’

23. **Despite a growing recognition of its destructive effects, the core challenge discussed in this document lacks a broadly recognized name and definition.**
24. **While the Jewish community is able to more clearly define ‘classic anti-Semitism’ and anti-Zionism** – see, in this regard, the most widely adopted definition of anti-Semitism, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which breaks ground in [describing](#) anti-Jewish perceptions and their manifestations in right- and left-wing contexts – ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ remains largely lacking and intellectual and thoughtful response.
25. Traction the IHRA has gained reflects its centrality as an institutional and discourse focus.<sup>19</sup> Alongside this focus, and in the context of the IHRA, **it is critical to articulate the ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ phenomenon.**
26. **Hence, efforts to directly address ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ should initially aim to accurately define the challenge:** to reach and apply a broadly shared understanding of what it looks like; and to push up-front-and-center the agenda of Jews having the right, like other societal groups, to define their own experience.
27. **The battle of definitions takes on political dimensions. Anti-Semitic anti-Zionist movements are working to define fundamental questions in mainstream discourse,**<sup>20</sup> such as regarding what constitutes legitimate criticism of Israel and what is anti-Semitism; whether Jews' status is on par with white privileged groups; and whether Jews have a right to define their own experience. **Conservatives are also laying claim to turf in the definition battle,** and are often eager to broaden definitions of anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism, and their intersection well into realms of legitimate criticism; and to partake in highly damaging efforts to ideologize and politicize the issue.

---

<sup>17</sup> See in Reut’s Trend Detector [here](#) on the Biden administration’s announcement of its [embrace](#) of the IHRA definition in this context. For background, in the U.S. the 2019 [Executive Order](#) on Combating Anti-Semitism made the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism part of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in federally funded programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance.

<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the British experience is informative, with turbulence in the British Labour Party emanating from an inter-party eruption of tension surrounding also how anti-Semitism is defined and who gets to define it. It was in this case precipitated by Labour Party’s handling of anti-Semitism and resulted in Jeremy Corbyn’s [dismissal](#) (and [re-instatement](#)). In more than a decade of tracking movements that promote Israel’s delegitimization, Reut has consistently found developments and key milestones in which the U.S. tracks the UK by approximately five years.

<sup>19</sup> For example: The IHRA definition of antisemitism highlighted as the second JFNA policy recommendation [issued](#) to the new administration; and engaged on with broader audiences, such as [here](#). Recently, a State Department official has [said](#) the Biden administration embraces the IHRA definition as an “invaluable tool.”

<sup>20</sup> Definitions will also be crucial for the way social media platforms navigate these issues. For example, the ADL’s [Online Hate Index](#), a platform designed for better understanding and tracking hate speech on the internet, predetermines types of speech that falls into categories of more and less explicit anti-Semitism.

---

## Consensus-building imperative

28. **Internally: 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.
29. **Externally: 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.

## Central role of decentralized progressive Jewish engagement

30. **Progressive Jews are in effect, the main advocates on the front-line of influencing on the issue of progressive anti-Semitism.** Today, these Jews face a battle against rising influences for the soul of the progressive left that can affect their continued inclusion therein. A growing number of such progressive Jews are also finding new and innovative ways to participate and to organize. This engagement spike is shaping the map of Jewish organizing.
31. **Harnessing a wide-reaching progressive Jewish front will require adapting to a decentralized** grassroots structure for engagement, which confers greater weight upon personal, direct, and authentic communication. In this context, burgeoning progressive Jewish movements, Facebook communities, and initiatives – that are often highly localized or niche-oriented – many of which are also Zionist and all of which are organically connected within progressive networks, constitute the new ‘front lines’ of advocacy against anti-Semitism on the progressive left. They best represent the opportunity to engage a broader base of emerging actors to rapidly accelerate the quantity of engagement on this issue, and to pilot 'micro-engagement' modes.
32. Thus, the imperative is to **revitalize the community relations field** and the role of its key institutions and networks – In times of social unrest, the community relations field – which operates as an independent arm of Jewish communal organizations – is the strongest asset in the Jewish establishment for engaging with other communities and mobilizing the Jewish community around a cause (for recent background, see Reut’s [paper](#) on the community relations field).

**THE END.**

---

# ANNEX: Key background conceptual tensions

1. **Key concepts that have precluded full Jewish inclusion in progressive movements are subject to pressure within the left.**
2. **The dominance of skin color-based constructs has been more openly questioned** following November 2020's election results – and significantly Biden's relatively poor performance among Latino voters, a small spike in support for Trump among Black voters, and disappointing results for Democrats in down-ballot races.<sup>21</sup> **Significantly, the diminishment**

---

<sup>21</sup> See examples on post-election repudiations of skin color-based societal categorizations on the grounds that it:

- Failed to reflect voter behavior given that: Trump improved his vote share over 2016 with both Latino and Black voters, while losing most of the advantage he previously had with college-educated white males. More broadly, the relevance of viewing the Latino vote as monolithic is called into question given the sharply varying politics and ethnicities of people from nearly two dozen countries on two continents; of viewing the Asian vote as monolithic on the same grounds; and of assuming consistent and homogeneous behavior among Black voters.
- Reduces complexities to certitudes, reflecting a failure to understand human beings – Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar: “Trump did a much better job at understanding Hispanics. Sometimes, Democrats see Hispanics as monolithic”; Democratic Rep. Ruben Gallego urging regarding Hispanics that, “It’s just important that white liberals don’t impose their thoughts and policies on us.”
- Represents a disconnect from the perspectives of minorities it aims to speak for: “a gulf between how the ‘woke’ left processes racism and how many people in the real world do,” whereby progressive influencers assumes that racism is a wedge issue and fighting it is a key motivator, whereas “Black or Latino Trump voters may know quite well that racism exists... yet not prioritize it to the degree that the woke consensus assumes any sensible person would.” See, for example, an outcome of a proposition on education that “captured the gap between the vision laid out by the liberal establishment in California... and the sentiments of many Black, Latino, Asian and Arab voters,” and reflected even in use of language, such as the term Latinx to describe Latinos in a way that’s gender-neutral, which “only served to puzzle many Hispanics.”

In a different context, the categorization of People of Color as a political identity monolith sparked tensions in the context of the social justice uprising in 2020, which peaked with the killing of George Floyd in May of that year. In this case, the exceptionalism of the Black experience in the U.S. brought into question the morality and accuracy of 'lumping in' different circumstances of different ethnic groups in America under the same banner, an internal debate accelerated by the discourse ushered in by the New York Times' 1619 Project. See here for Reut paper on The 1619 Project and the Jewish angle.

---

**of skin color-based constructs as a dominant social categorization filter creates space to challenge pervasive assumptions about Jewish privilege,** and to define the Jewish experience in the context of progressive values.

3. In addition, **tension is growing between moderate and progressive Democrats regarding the extent to which messages reflecting radical policy change harmed or help the Party.** The 2020 election results also brought to the fore a simmering tension between incremental approaches to achieving social change based on reforming existing institutions, versus radical approaches that assume the illegitimacy of existing institutions. In election post-mortems, prominent moderates have attributed weak Democratic performance to radical progressive messages that call for fundamental dismantlement of existing systems, such as defund the police (see [here](#) and [here](#), for example). Most recently, President Obama's [reference](#) to 'defund the police' as an alienating slogan ushered in a [wave](#) of progressive criticism (including from 'the Squad,' see for example [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

**Radical change models present challenges for Jewish and pro-Israel communities whose stake in the status quo is rooted in the relative security and prosperity that Jewish and pro-Israel communities have achieved.** Moreover, in radical environments, when mistrust of institutions abounds and threatens to turn into demonization, Jews – given dominant associations of Jewish power – **are vulnerable to being framed as obstacles to social justice.**

**© THE REUT GROUP 2021**