

APRIL 4 - APRIL 17, 2021

TREND DETECTOR NO. 12: ON THE PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE



TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'

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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

This Trend Monitor covers the two-week period between April 4 – April 17, 2021, focusing on events and discourse affecting Jewish and pro-Israel positioning in U.S. progressive communities. Key observations within this time period include:

- The phenomenon of ‘erasing’ Jewish narratives, identity, and agency based on a designation of Jews within a ‘white oppressor’ category is happening, it is getting noticed, and is starting to be addressed. A side effect of this erasure, a ‘de-exceptionalization’ of the Jewish experience, manifested in the past two weeks challenging Jewish communal work defining and combating anti-Semitism. It also aligns with a foreign policy emphasis on equitable application of human rights principles through the categorical prisms prevalent in progressive politics.
- In progressive politics, the past two weeks have shown Democratic Party elements increasing willing to ‘take on’ Israel.
- The headline on Jewish community dynamics calls attention to a perceived increasing centrality, in discourse and in positioning, of J Street.

TRACKING ERASURE AND PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE

‘[Erasive anti-Semitism](#)’¹ refers to what can happen when contemporary progressive discourse enables, often unwittingly, a *de-facto* negation of the right of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identity, experience, and vulnerability. It stems from a conceptual mismatch in which Jews are cast uniformly as powerful white oppressors based on binary sets of such ‘conceptual categories,’ centered on class-based and skin color-based designations, as well as a categorical division between defenders of the status quo versus promoters of a radical upending

¹ Jewish author Ben Freeman [coined](#) the concept of ‘erasive anti-Semitism’ to describe the erasure of Jewish identity and the erasure of Jews as victims of prejudice. Reut’s paper refers to the phenomenon as an undermining of Jewish narrative self-determination negating the rights of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identity, experience, and vulnerability.

thereof. Fitting the Jewish experience into these conceptual categories can flatten Jewish identity and fail to capture core elements of the Jewish experience, resulting in an erasure.

On the one hand, the past two weeks saw growing attention to threats to Jewish and pro-Israel communities stemming from erasive discourse or erasive anti-Semitism, and to the need to respond:

- Antisemitism Education Initiative [video](#) that also addresses anti-Semitism arising as a result of Jews not fitting into racially divided conceptual categories prevalent on the progressive left, defining Jews as white, and characterizing Jews as uniformly privileged.
- [Backlash](#) against Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, following a message she directed at Jews in an [interview](#), which implied that American Jews, as “now part of the ownership class... now want to take that ladder of opportunity away from those who do not have it.” Weingarten subsequently [conceded](#) her “flawed choice of language.”
- Launch of [film foundation](#) funded by Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw to “...make visible a fuller range of Jewish voices, identities, experiences and perspectives — at a time when social divisions run painfully deep and mainstream depictions too often fail to reflect the Jewish community in all its complexity.” The foundation aims to tell more Jewish stories on the screen, to tell more social justice stories, to reflect a rapidly evolving sense of Jewish identity and diversity, and to expand the range of stories reflecting Jewish lives.

At the same time, the past couple of weeks have seen a number of incidents reflecting the ongoing pervasiveness of the erasive progressive discourse challenge. In particular, recent events display the ‘de-exceptionalizing’ of the Jewish experience,² or a rejection of the notion that the Jewish experience deviates from prevalent progressive conceptual categories or that the nature of collective Jewish vulnerability is unique and tracks differently from other dominant experiences of oppression. Effects can be seen in the past two weeks undermining the legitimacy of Jewish mobilization against anti-Semitism, and also in framing foreign policy rhetoric on Israel.

- **De-exceptionalizing the Jewish experience as a basis for opposing attempts to define and combat anti-Semitism.** Growing conflict between camps of Jewish progressive groups center on a main question around whether Jews have a right to self-advocate against anti-Semitism given Jews’ status of relative privilege. A side that organizes against anti-Semitism warns against minimizing anti-Semitism, which “operates and manifests in many

² From the Evasive Anti-Semitism [paper](#): “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.”

ways that are distinct from other forms of oppression” ([here](#)). This Jewish Currents [Responsa](#) relies on an opposite logic in attacking the Jewish left for mobilizing against anti-Semitism in the face of more pressing social justice concerns.

See also, for example, [this](#) Jewish Voices for Peace-led initiative convening fifteen far-left Jewish groups to “urge a shift from discussing how antisemitism is defined, to a focus on how antisemitism can be dismantled, alongside all forms of racism and bigotry,” exhorting to first “not isolate antisemitism from other forms of oppression.” Similarly, in the [words](#) of Palestine Legal, “Instead of politicized definitions, we need to understand and work against the common threat to all vulnerable communities, which is a resurgent white supremacy and fascism that is taking lives and working to undermine all of our freedom.”

- **De-exceptionalizing Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship in foreign policy** – In its Israel-related manifestation, the past two weeks have seen a prevalence of ‘inclusive foreign policy’ aligned rhetoric. This approach, promoted, for example, by [Ihan Omar](#), seeks to engage uniformly through a progressive-crafted human-rights centered concept, in which Israel can be framed through the prism of white privileged regional oppressor.³ This flattening of identity and context can result in a failure to distinguish the pillars underlying the U.S.-Israel relationship, or Israel’s unique circumstance within the region, in conducting engagement).

TRACKING PROGRESSIVE TRENDS

- **Direct progressive wing challenge:** Rep. Betty McCollum [introduced](#) a bill, with co-sponsors including all Squad members, seeking to restrict U.S. aid from being used for a variety of Israeli military operations. Endorsing organizations include J Street and Americans for Peace Now.
- **Biden’s distance on Israel reflects a Democratic climate** – In the [Washington Post](#): “the new president is signaling that he feels less inclination than his predecessors to showcase a closeness with Israel. Democrats in general have become more skeptical of the Jewish state in recent years, while Israeli leaders have aligned themselves more closely with the GOP — a significant shift in the 73-year relationship between the two countries.” Meanwhile, the administration [enjoys](#) a warmer-than-anticipated relationship with the left, also hiring significant staffers from the left.

³ See, for example, a conflation of racial injustice in the U.S. with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in AOC’s emphasis in her [conversation](#) with the JCRC (“Just like here in the United States, I don’t believe that children should be detained”). See also IfNotNow regional organizer on the [role](#) of the recent events in the U.S. “activat[ing] activated many young Jews who saw the connections between the systems of violence used to maintain injustice in American and in Israel/Palestine.”

The attack on the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility attributed to Israel represents an early focal potential clash between Israeli and U.S. interests; Israel has been [framed](#) as trying to act as a 'spoiler' in advance of U.S.-Iranian negotiations, which are a process that Congressional Democrats largely support (see [here](#), for example).

- **The New York mayoral race has been framed as a front in a progressive-moderate battle to define Democratic politics:** See [here](#) and [here](#) on the sustained polling leads of Andrew Yang mobilizing progressive activists and leaders to action. Meanwhile, the Forward recently obtained audio of Dianne Morales, one of the leading candidates for mayor of New York City, [calling](#) Israel an apartheid state.
- **Infrastructure supporting 'stifling speech charges'⁴ – Palestine Legal,** for example, showed up in the CUNY IHRA adoption [controversy](#) to [defend](#) a key figure in the eruption over definition adoption at CUNY that pit IHRA proponents against silencing charges. Palestine Legal also [filed](#) a civil rights complaint against Florida State University on behalf of a former Student Government Association Senate President "over the anti-Palestinian environment it tolerated and amplified against our client" [after](#) he made what critics see as blatant anti-Semitic remarks in social media posts. See also [this](#) event, titled 'The Movement Will Not Be Censored, featuring the former FSU SGA president, and representatives from Jewish Voice for Peace Action and Adalah Justice Project.
- **In the background,** a newly released book about 'The AOC Generation' [describes](#) a burgeoning leftist infrastructure, propelled by electoral vehicles such as Brand New Congress, Indivisible, Justice Democrats, and the resurrected DSA; media outlets, including The Intercept and Jacobin and the Young Turks; and think tanks, notably Data for Progress.

SHIFTING DYNAMICS ON THE JEWISH LEFT

J Street's moment in the sun: With the new Democratic administration, J Street is emerging in discourse with greater centrality. J Street's annual conference features key progressives⁵ as well as more mainstream Democratic voices.⁶ Main foreign policy areas of [focus](#) in the conference

⁴ From the Erasive Anti-Semitism [paper](#): '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. Aligned campaigns to discredit Jewish influence also contribute to a 'chilling effect' of self-censoring Jewish-related perspectives and grievances.

⁵ Including Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Ayanna Pressley.

⁶ These include such as Democratic stars Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and Haile Soifer, executive director of the [Jewish Democratic Council of America](#), a group whose visible mobilization through the years of the Trump administration and organizing for Democrats is manifesting in a role of growing centrality in the current political environment.

reflect a determination to keep Israeli-Palestinian peace an administration priority, and an [agenda](#) that seeks to frame the conversation of possible alternatives to the two-state solution. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas [is slated](#) to participate.

Ron Kampeas (in 'The Tell,' April 15) describes recent bold moves J Street has taken as evidence that its ascendant influence has imbued the organization with renewed assertiveness: J Street has [backed](#) a proposed bill that would restrict Israeli spending of U.S. aid; is presenting former President Jimmy Carter with its peace-maker award; .and has been aggressively backing Biden's efforts to return to the Iran deal.

In the background, **ongoing Jewish communal tensions** were reflected in the last couple of weeks in:

- Controversy surrounding recommendations to remove the ZOA from the Boston JCRC, which [culminated](#) in a JCRC decision that ZOA not be removed. several left-wing Jewish groups filed a petition to initiate the removal of ZOA, specifically singling out ZOA President Mort Klein's comments on the Black Lives Matter movement. A similar scenario involving the ZOA's participation in the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations inflamed divisions within the organization.
- Israeli-Jewish divides, reflected in the [reaction](#) of progressive American Jewish organizations – [including](#) J Street, Americans for Peace Now, T'ruah, the New Israel Fund, Habonim Dror, and affiliates of the Reform movement – to a KKL-JNF plan allowing it to buy land in the West Bank even for isolated settlements.