

10 Ways to Have Conscientious Conversations on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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The past weeks have seen a steep increase in antisemitism related to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. To be sure, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always engendered strong emotions and differences of opinion and such disagreements are naturally heightened at a time of crisis. Injecting bigotry into any conversation, analyses, policies, reporting – whether antisemitism or Islamophobia – only exacerbates conflict. Invoking antisemitic tropes and myths can be harmful to all of society by allowing hate to become corrosive, and intolerance to go unchecked. This can foment bias and lead to more violence, distort reality, and derail otherwise productive conversations, undermining our ability to resolve the issues that can end the conflict.

Rhetoric aimed at individuals who, because of their religion, ethnicity or other real or perceived characteristics, are viewed as representing countries and their actions can be racist in impact even if not intent and lead to real harm, particularly against marginalized people. In recent memory, rhetoric that associated the COVID-19 pandemic with China has fueled violence against the AAPI community. Similarly, associating Mexican immigrants with "criminals" led to policies of separating families at the border and incited violence against Latinx communities; designating African nations as "shithole countries" resulted in restrictive visa and migration processes and describing Japanese Americans as "spies" during WWII resulted in internment camps.

In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in addition to overt antisemitic discourse at its most extreme, the animus against Jews that has been exacerbated by vitriolic [anti-Zionism](#) and rhetoric that demonizes Israel and negates the Jewish right to self-determination can result in harm to the Jewish community. Violence against whole communities is not unprecedented, including the persecution of Jewish people by the Soviet government, the Farhud pogrom in Iraq, and other anti-Zionist violence against Jewish people across the Middle East and North Africa. At times, such rhetoric creates conditions whereby Jews feel unsafe, and environments where antisemitism may be expressed more freely.

Below are common pitfalls which invoke antisemitism, as well as proactive statements and suggestions on avoiding bias and bigotry when discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These strategies are aimed to support non-Jewish allies. A companion collaboration with partners in the Muslim community with strategies to avoid anti-Arab racism when talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will follow this in a future blog.

1. Learn more about the conflict

- The [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#) has [roots that are thousands](#) of years old, and there are a wide variety of historical, religious, political and cultural factors in play.
- In order to truly be able to discuss the conflict, avoid oversimplification which only leads to stereotyping and bias.
- The best way to do that is to read a variety of informed sources from many perspectives.
- Avoid extreme voices on both sides – be wary of those who exclusively or overwhelmingly blame one group for the tensions in the region.

2. Language matters, it is important to avoid the following

- Refer to Israel as the State of Israel or the Jewish state, as opposed to “the Zionist entity” or other euphemisms.
- Demonizing and dehumanizing Jewish people by using **antisemitic language, symbols, tropes, stereotypes** like **invoking blood libel, deicide, financial control, or disloyalty**
- Conspiracy theories about Jewish **power/control** of media, US foreign policy.
- Using dehumanizing depictions of Jewish people as **non-human, animals, vermin, or insects**.
- Strive for a **common language based on respect** when discussing complex issues like the Mideast conflict. Avoid inaccurate, inflammatory, divisive, and counterproductive language.

3. Avoid denying Jewish history, invoking the Holocaust as a comparison

- You can express strong opposition to specific actions without invoking extreme terms such as "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing." These and similar terms are not accurate descriptions of the conflict in the Middle East; to levy these charges trivializes historical and modern-day atrocities and exacerbates tensions and the potential for violence.
- Comparing **Israel to Nazi Germany** or Gaza to Warsaw ghetto, depicting Israeli leaders as Nazi leaders, etc., **denying the Holocaust** or appropriating Jewish trauma for political advocacy.

4. Refrain from delegitimizing concerns of Jewish people

- Dismissing concerns about safety or dismissing the threat of the terrorist organization Hamas or other extremists.
- Antisemitism is widespread and can be subtle; antisemitism can be perpetuated by well-intentioned people.
- **Applying double standards to Jewish people or Israel.**
- Delegitimizing people’s identity and Jewish or Palestinian people’s **right to self-determination in ancestral land.**

5. Avoid holding Jewish individuals accountable for the actions of the nation state of Israel

- Demanding Jewish people renounce Zionism or denounce the state of Israel, or certain extremists by saying [Arab people are semites](#).
- Tokenizing Jews e.g., dividing the community into “good Jews” and “bad Jews” and invalidating someone’s Jewish identity based on political views.
- Attacking Jewish people or spaces to express anti-Israel or pro-Palestinian activism on (eg. “Free Palestine” graffiti on a synagogue).

6. Use education and knowledge for a productive discussion

- Learn the [history of antisemitism](#), its roots, and [contemporary manifestations](#).
- If you invest in educating yourself about the region, use credible sources and scholarship. Productive discussions are based in knowledge rather than ignorance or prejudice
- Unpack terms (i.e. to ensure there is a shared definition.) [and create a shared language for respectful discussion](#)

7. Focus on people, not policies

- Listen to others' lived experiences and seek to understand rather than respond.
- Accept that every Jewish person has their own experience and perspective, and they may differ widely.
- Ask and listen to how individuals define their identity as Jewish people, Israeli people, or Zionists. Identity is complicated, and not everyone identifies in the same way.
- People should direct criticism towards specific government actions and those leaders enacting those policies, not towards Israeli citizens or Jewish people en masse.

8. Listen to the voices of those affected

- Just like we should listen to any marginalized group when they say they are affected by bias and hate, we should listen when people raise alarms about antisemitism and other forms of bigotry stemming from the Middle East conflict.
- Allow experiences to remain distinct and don't compare – avoid “pain Olympics”.
- Be sensitive to the pain, suffering, and loss experienced by all parties to the conflict.
- Allow individuals with personal experiences and trauma associated with this region to opt out of conversations and/or determine how they want to engage.

9. Don't make the conflict a litmus test for participation in other causes

- Projecting US racial or political dynamics onto the Israeli-Palestinian conflict leads to misunderstanding and faulty analysis that can do more harm than good.
- Americans have diverse and complicated views on the Middle East conflict; do not ask Jews or anyone else to take a particular position on the conflict in order to participate in other causes and movements.
- Try not to liken the history of Israel-Palestine to the history of other regions, like North America, or put an American lens on the Mideast conflict.

10. Strive to learn more about defining and naming antisemitism

- Start with [Antisemitism Uncovered](https://www.antisemitism.adl.org/) at [antisemitism.adl.org](https://www.antisemitism.adl.org/)
- [Call out](#) or call-in manifestations of antisemitism (and/or Islamophobia) and keep conversations on a productive track.
- [Report](#) instances of antisemitism (whether Israel-related or not).

- When receiving feedback that a statement was antisemitic or anti-Muslim, pause and explore how and why that might be true rather than allowing it to shut down the conversation.

Why is it important to recognize antisemitism?

[Antisemitism is defined as](#) a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

Normalizing even seemingly harmless forms of hate-based prejudice strengthens dangerous social attitudes, which can erode the values of a just society. Silence and complacency in the face of biased remarks or actions permit others to internalize harmful messages, making such messages commonplace. ADL's [Pyramid of Hate](#) illustrates how rhetoric can escalate into policies, practice, and actions.

More resources for students, educators, and community:

- [Empowering young people in the aftermath of hate](#)
- [Helping students make sense of news stories about bias](#)
- [Myths and facts about Muslim people and Islam](#)
- [Talking to young children about prejudice](#)
- [Challenging Biased Language](#)
- [Report instances of antisemitism](#)
- [Israel's Problems are not like America's - The Atlantic](#)
- [How an American left lens can get Israel wrong](#)

General resources:

- [Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era](#)

- [ADL H.E.A.T. Map](#)
- [2020 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents](#)
- [Gringlas Unit on Contemporary Antisemitism](#)
- [Glossary of Key Terms/Events in Israel's History](#)