

***Why Do People Discriminate Against Jews?***

**By Jonathan Fox and Lev Topor.**

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*Suzanne D. Rutland*

For anyone who wishes to gain a deeper understanding of twentieth-century antisemitism, the analysis of Fox and Topor provides innovative and original insights into what has been described as ‘the longest hatred’. The authors use a comparative approach, drawing on the Religion and State-Minorities round 3 data set (RAMSM3) from 1990-2014, as well as the ADL Global 100 Survey. This enables them to test theories about the causes of discrimination in a cross-country examination of 76 countries. In comparison with most studies of antisemitism which focus on respondents’ attitudes, the authors focus on overt acts. They argue that this is important, because attitudes do not predict behaviours. As well, by drawing on aspects of discrimination that can be objectively measured, they avoid controversial issues.

Another important element is the authors’ combination of the approach of the humanities, which focuses on Jewish discrimination and antisemitism, and the social sciences’ focus on general religious discrimination. The authors argue that this is an important innovation because they know of ‘no systematic comparison of what insights each literature might provide to the other’ (22). This approach has also enabled them to demonstrate the uniqueness of antisemitism, based on objective criteria. In this way, the authors seek to create a better understanding of discrimination not only in terms of antisemitism but also in general in terms of discrimination of religious minorities in the different countries examined. This comparative element adds an important extra layer to the value of the book because, as the authors note, ‘discrimination does not occur in a vacuum’ (3).

The book develops within a clear and logical framework. Fox and Topor differentiate between government-based (GRD) and society-based religious discrimination (SRD) with data that can apply to any religious group, enabling them to create objective criteria for discriminatory actions in the two different categories. After the general introductory chapter, the authors provide an overview of the general patterns of discrimination and nature of discrimination in Chapter 2 for both GRD and SRD. They include a detailed table listing all 76 countries, comparing GRD and SRD, before moving on to a more detailed discussion of each category. They note that for SRD, speech acts, such as anti-Jewish content in the media, especially relating to conspiracy theories, and non-violent attacks with graffiti and vandalism, are the most common against Jews. Interestingly, Australia does not have any government religious discrimination but rates among the higher levels for



SRD (Table 2.1a). It is important to note that this figure was based on 2014, when a major conflict with Gaza took place, but the book was published in 2021 so that the most recent figures post-October 7 are not included.

The authors then focus on what they argue are the three main factors influencing antisemitic discrimination, drawing on relevant parallels with the other major faith groups where relevant. They include the more detailed statistical analysis for these chapters in an appendix (Appendix A) to ensure that the book is ‘user friendly’, an effective approach so that those who are not experts in quantitative analysis can follow the arguments, but social science experts can still examine the data analysis. Chapter 3 discusses religious discrimination, beginning with an overview of two millennia of Christian anti-Judaism, followed by a discussion of two case studies: Europe and Greece. They found that in countries based on a religion there is an increase in GRD, but this is not the case to the same extent with SRD due to common concerns about secularism. Chapter 4 deals with anti-Zionism, shedding important new light on our understanding of this phenomenon. They begin the chapter with two main points: first, anti-Zionism can mirror classical antisemitism but using the terms ‘Zionism’ and ‘Zionist’ is ‘politically correct’. Second, they note that

there is a tendency among at least some anti-Zionists to ascribe to all Jews responsibility for the perceived injustices committed by Israel or for the existence of Israel itself. Thus, the ideology can in and of itself be a motivation for discrimination against Jews. (91)

At the same time, they stress the complexity of the relationship of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, and that they do not wish to imply that all anti-Zionism is antisemitic. The chapter provides an historical overview of anti-Zionism, including in Muslim countries, followed by a discussion of anti-Zionism and general social science theory, particularly the ‘securitization theory’, which applies to both Jews and Muslims, though in very different contexts. Through this discussion, they demonstrate clearly their belief that the key link between anti-Zionism and discrimination is when Jews outside of Israel are blamed and sometimes targeted for ‘the perceived bad behaviour of Israel’ (102). They also discuss issues of dual loyalty, the focus on racism and UNGA resolution 3379 that equated Zionism with racism, as well as those who excuse antisemitism and even violence towards Jews as the fault of Israel and Jewish support for Israel. They also refer to the work of Norman Geras, who argues that not all who criticise Israel are antisemitic, but a ‘substantial section’ of the left is (102), as well as to his concept of ‘alibi’ for those who substitute the term ‘Jews’ with ‘Zionists’. This is an insightful chapter, the relevance of which has increased with the upsurge of antisemitism post-October 7, because the authors clarify that if anti-Zionism leads to overt acts of discrimination this can objectively be classified as antisemitism. As they state, there is:

...no shortage of countries across the world that objectively violate human rights and other accepted international norms. Yet, it is difficult to think of

any other case where an entire identity group is consistently, across dozens of countries, held responsible for the actions or perceived actions, much less the perceived illegitimacy of a single state. (110–1)

While the book was published in 2021, these issues have become even more relevant post October 7, when Jews in many different countries have faced discrimination, exclusion, and verbal and even physical abuse if they support Israel.

Conspiracy theories, including demonstrating how they influence both religious and anti-Zionist discrimination, are the focus of Chapter 5. Fox and Topor argue that ‘the extent to which conspiracy theories about Jews are popular in a country, discrimination against Jews will also be more common’ (115). They also argue that these theories have a dynamic of their own because they simplify issues, with the Jews being the traditional scapegoat. This chapter provides new understandings of how such conspiracy theories impact on society by highlighting the negative role that antisemitic tropes play, again providing context and understanding for the current situation. For example, the Universities of Australia’s new definition of antisemitism states that antisemitism ‘includes hate speech, epithets, caricatures, stereotypes, tropes, Holocaust denial, and antisemitic symbols’, but the definition does not set out what these are (“Statement on Racism”, 2025). In their discussion of conspiracy theories, Fox and Topor clearly delineate these forms of antisemitic speech, which they point out in Chapter 2 are most common in SRD and which moved from the margins to the mainstream even before October 7. They also stress that conspiracy theories are a more constant predictor than religious ideology and anti-Zionism but there is often a connection and that ‘these tropes have a life of their own. Antisemitism ... can be like a virus that mutates over time but still has the same core’ (140), with the tropes of Jewish power being closely associated with this core.

Finally, in Chapter 6 the authors provide a detailed discussion of the British example, beginning with the history of British religious anti-Judaism, anti-Jewish stereotypes fostered in literature, particularly from the sixteenth century with Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* onwards, and then anti-Zionism that developed especially after 1967 and Israel’s conquest of territory. The authors make a key point about the Community Security Trust (CST), that ‘the Jewish community in Britain is the only minority that operates a private security organization which works alongside the police’ (152). This section concludes noting the increase of the number of cases of verbal or physical assaults on Jews in Britain from 350 in 2002 to 1,652 in 2018, with a graph illustrating the year-by-year annual increase (Figure 6.2, 152).

The chapter concludes with a discussion of Corbyn’s Labour Party, as a case study. The authors stress that while they cannot prove Corbyn is an antisemite, they can illustrate that many took his ‘public acts and speech both before and after he became the party’s leader as license to engage in overt

harassment of Jews as long as it was expressed in the language of anti-Zionism or criticism of Israel' (163).

Throughout their analysis, the authors demonstrate that the unique factor in Jewish discrimination is that SRD is comparatively high even though GRD is lower than for other minority religions. Their findings highlight the fact that in Christian-majority countries SRD against Jews is higher than for any other religious minority, while in Muslim-majority countries it is higher than for all minorities except Christians. Their findings indicate that attitudes in society do not influence government policies in the case of Jew-hatred, even though according to some theories there is an interrelationship. In trying to understand this phenomenon, the authors theorise this may be due to the legacy of the Holocaust, where the Jewish genocide was based on Nazi government policies.

While this study clearly makes a significant contribution to our understanding of factors that lead to discrimination against Jews, and in this way to antisemitism, there is a need to follow up with a similar study post-October 7, if a similar data base is available. For example, in summarising Chapter 4, Fox and Topor argue that they do not have sufficient data to show that the 'the Israel factor causes more SRD' (166) and that anti-Israelism relates to government elites. This concept is repeated in the conclusion, where the authors state that anti-Israel attitudes and politics are more likely to manifest themselves 'nearly exclusively to discrimination by government (GRD)' (185). Yet, since October 7, societies in the Western world have experienced a substantial increase in SRD, so that new data may provide more evidence in this regard. As well, more investigation is needed into 'blaming the victim', another element that has emerged strongly post October 7.

In their concluding chapter, the authors discuss areas for further research, such as how the 'canary in the coalmine theory', which they endorse, operates. Another area they suggest needs to be addressed is the pattern of whether 'engaging in collective punishment against an entire group for the real or perceived behaviour of some members of that group is present with other minorities, particularly Muslims and other migrant minorities in the West' (181-2). They also critique the securitisation theory and argue that a broader approach is needed to understand the stigmatisation of a specific group.

In the final section of their conclusion, Fox and Topor begin with a comparison with the Passover seder. They express the hope that just as the rabbis debated until sunrise, when their students came to tell them that it is time for morning prayers, and as seder discussions are continued from year to year, their book will be seen as an opening for further discussion, debate and research. I believe this groundbreaking text will indeed lead to reflection, discussion and follow-up research, particularly regarding the impact of October 7 and the resultant upsurge of attacks on Jews especially in the Western world.

**Reference list**

“Statement on Racism.” 2025. *Universities Australia* (27 February).  
<https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/statement-on-racism/>