

# INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY ANTISEMITISM

Although more than seventy years have passed since the Holocaust ended, antisemitism is still prevalent. In recent years, expressions of antisemitism have increased around the world. The Anti-Defamation League and Simon Wiesenthal Center—two leading non-profit organizations dedicated to combatting antisemitism and bigotry—report a rise in the number of violent antisemitic assaults taking place in the United States and warn of increased antisemitic attitudes across Europe. Antisemitism continues to be widespread throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

Antisemitism has a very long history. Scholar Robert Wistrich termed it “the longest hatred,” due to its existence for over 2,000 years. Its causes, context, and character have evolved over time and are shaped by local political, religious, economic, and social climates.

## Post-Holocaust Antisemitism

Horrible images from extermination and concentration camps after the Holocaust ended, along with testimony that spoke to the brutality of the Nazi Regime at the Nuremberg Trials that followed shortly thereafter, created a sense of collective shame about what antisemitism could lead to; however, this did not cause hatred toward Jews simply to disappear. Instead antisemitism was transformed—manifesting itself in different ways and from different sources.

While it was less socially acceptable to openly express antisemitic attitudes, there were still many US-based fascist, neo-Nazi, and racist organizations in the 1950s and 60s, even though their efforts did move further into the shadows.

At the same time, the main population sources of antisemitism shifted, initially away from Western Europe to the Soviet Union, which became the center for antisemitic literature all over the world.

Later, as the Soviet Empire crumbled and the Cold War ended, the Islamic world, already largely at war with Israel for decades, became a major source of antisemitism, adopting many of the words and images that had characterized Christian antisemitism for centuries, as well as the antisemitic beliefs expressed through traditional Islamic sources.

On the positive side, three factors changed the framework for antisemitism’s continued existence specifically in the United States:

- The American Jewish community mobilized with a deep sense of purpose to work for the safety of Jews domestically and around the world, including support for a strong Israel, and actively engaged in civil rights and social justice issues.
- There was remarkable progress in Christian attitudes toward Jews, led by the Catholic Church with the landmark 1965 *Nostra Aetate*. In this document, the Roman Catholic Church recanted centuries of teaching that the Jews, as a people, had killed Jesus Christ and as a result were cursed.
- A growing body of literature, film, and historical documentation supported widespread education about the Holocaust. While not a guarantee against antisemitism, it provided continued remembrance, learning, and questioning as new generations emerged.

## Antisemitism Today

As the memories of the Holocaust fade and criticism of Israel has mounted, many inhibitions have weakened. Today, antisemitism has a global reach. It is expressed openly in the form of hate speech, violence, and denial and distortion of the Holocaust. It is also expressed as opposition to Israel's right to exist, which can include demonization of its people and its leaders. The term sometimes used to describe this modern form of antisemitism is the “new antisemitism.”

Many of the classic themes and stereotypes from earlier times are reappearing, such as the depiction of Jews as subhuman (e.g., represented as spiders, bloodthirsty vampires, and octopuses), the myth about their quest for world domination, and their control over the media, economy, government, or other societal institutions. The fictional *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, first printed more than a century ago, remains the most widely published piece of antisemitic literature of all time.

In many Middle Eastern countries, antisemitism is promoted in state-controlled media and in educational systems. Militant groups with political power, such as Hamas, use genocidal language regarding Jews and Israel. The former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, repeatedly declared the Holocaust a “myth” and that Israel should be “wiped off the map.” In Europe, antisemitism is increasingly espoused among both far-right and far-left political parties. In the United States, Jewish students on some college campuses are confronted by antisemitic hostility while other Jewish individuals and institutions are assaulted, vandalized, and harassed.

With the advances in communication technology, antisemitism is now widely and easily spread through diverse media outlets; with antisemitic groups and individuals using social media platforms at an alarming rate to reach across the world to share their ideology, especially with young people.