

'A Tangled Web: Sarah Glynn unpicks the fine lines between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism'

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An organisation calling itself Jewish Human Rights Watch has just published a report that purports to show that the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign is motivated, not by concern for the plight of the Palestinians, but by hatred of Jews. As a Jew who has campaigned alongside SPSC activists on many occasions, I have no hesitation in condemning this as a gross and politically motivated slur on a group of people who are driven by a strong and genuine concern for humanity. (The fact that so much time has been spent putting together this report is a testament to SPSC's success in promoting the Palestinian cause and in winning wider support.) The report's argument is demonstrably flawed and absurd, but while this must be dismissed for the propaganda it so clearly is, it would be foolish simply to ignore all the material collected as this can open the lid on much more insidious processes that could pose real danger to both race relations and progressive activist organisations.

Jewish Human Rights Watch (JHRW) was established two years ago to fight against the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which aims to isolate Israel economically and culturally for its treatment of the Palestinians in the same way as South Africa was isolated for apartheid. JHRW misrepresents BDS as an anti-Jewish boycott, drawing parallels with Nazi Germany - while itself campaigning for bans on Palestinian events. David Collier, the author of the report, and of an earlier similar report on the Palestine Solidarity Campaign in England, describes himself as an independent researcher and blogger and a Zionist (i.e. a supporter of the existence of a specifically Jewish state in the biblical land of Israel). His research consisted of trawling through the public social media posts of everyone he could identify as taking part or attending SPSC activities (*not* SPSC's own posts or webpage) and recording all posts he deemed anti-Semitic. To appear in the report, the person had to have posted at least three examples during the two-year research period, though some posts selected are clearly dated even further back. However, although Collier claims that he set an 'unnaturally high standard' in defining anti-Semitism by excluding criticism of Israel, the majority of the posts he reproduces are conspiracy theories implicating the Israeli Secret Service, Mossad. In these posts, Mossad, sometimes alongside the CIA, is depicted as responsible for the perpetuation of Middle Eastern wars, the creation of ISIS, and organising major terrorist attacks - including 9/11 and the attacks in Paris. (In not counting other posts that criticise the Israeli state and Zionist actions against the Palestinians, Collier actually serves his own thesis, as it is these posts that demonstrate the real reason for activist campaigns.) All the people whose social media posts qualify them for inclusion in this report according to these criteria are automatically deemed to be motivated by anti-Semitism. Collier claims that the incidence of anti-Semitic postings is much

higher than might be expected in the general population, so 'The inevitable conclusion is that anti-Semitic tendency is a primary driver of anti-Israel activism.' But correlation does not prove causation, and if there is a causative link, then why not the other way around, with awareness of Israeli atrocities increasing receptiveness to the proliferating web of anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories? Collier's predilection for jumping to the worst possible conclusions is highlighted by a revealing comment on a post advertising an event on 'Empowering Palestinian Youth' hosted in a church. He observes that 'The Church has a 2000-year-old history of persecuting Jews and fuelling anti-Semitism'.

This is a report that had already decided its conclusion before it began; that knew what it was looking for and searched until it found it. It is a concentrated product of two years of trawling and sifting and of ignoring evidence of higher aims and ideals. It presents an extraordinarily biased view of all those it names, and imputes motives on no evidence. As an attack on SPSC it cannot be taken seriously, but it still makes for some uncomfortable reading.

The growth of unsubstantiated 'news' on the internet has vastly outpaced development of our critical faculties. We have learnt to approach government reports and stories in the mainstream media with a scepticism born of experience, and informal social media has helped us see through the official narratives. But alternative sources are often not treated with that same scepticism. Progressive activists, sickened by official propaganda and well-versed in the underhand machinations of outwardly respectable governments, are on the lookout for alternative sources of information and alternative explanations of the powers acting behind the scenes. We are only just beginning to realise the extent to which the internet has become a breeding ground for the confusions and deliberate deceptions of everyone who has a theory to propagate, a prejudice to share, or a political axe to grind. If a story appears to chime with known events it can be seized upon only too readily, especially if it has explanatory power. People with little previous political experience can prove particularly vulnerable. Many conspiracy theories contain an element of truth, and occasionally rather more, but they remain theories, untroubled by much evidence. Many are also harmless, but in others a combination of deliberate right-wing shit-stirring and more general political ignorance allows old prejudices, including anti-Semitism, to seep into the cracks.

We all know that people often 'like', or even share, posts on social media without reading them properly. We may agree with the general sentiment, and trust the person who has shared the post previously, or use the share as a convenient bookmark to isolate something we hope to look at later. Sometimes what might be shared as a simple anti-Zionist front page can hide overtly anti-Semitic arguments and images in the full document, of which the sharer is unaware. And sometimes items are shared not because we agree with what they say but because we want

others to see what things are being said. But not all of the posts illustrated in the JHRW report can be argued away so easily. Too often they employ traditional anti-Semitic tropes and images that should be easily recognisable, even if relabelled as 'Zionist'.

Old conspiracy theories about Jewish plans for world domination and a New World Order, so beloved of right-wing groups anxious to divert attention from the injustices of the actual political system, can morph into new plans for Zionist world domination. And legitimate fears about the impact of the 'Israel lobby' can become inflated to endow Zionists with extraordinary powers. These may be portrayed as enacted through the hate figures of the Rothschild banking dynasty, who (just as they have done since the nineteenth century) stand in for the evils of capitalism and a self-serving elite, which sees everything, including war, as a source of profit. And Holocaust denial is no longer constrained to the distant reaches of far-right propaganda, but can sometimes find a new niche as part of this imagined Zionist plan. Sharing of such material may constitute a genuinely ignorant and unintentional anti-Semitism, but it is dangerous stuff. It can also – as demonstrated by some particularly troubling examples in the report - open the door to overt anti-Semitic material, where it is 'Jews' who control the media and politicians. We even, in the few worst cases, find men with hooked noses chasing after money; that long-debunked Tsarist forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; quotations from Hitler; and the argument that Jews, through their behaviour, are responsible for their own persecution. The fascist initiators of this anti-Semitic propaganda must be laughing, and Jews have good reason to fear the revival of these ideas.

The Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign is very clear as an organisation that 'Anti-Semitism is a crime. Anti-Zionism is a duty', and, unlike Jewish Human Rights Watch, it distinguishes criticism of settler colonialism and the concept of an ethnically defined state, from criticism of Jews as Jews. It is the people and organisations that claim to speak on behalf of all Jews while defending the Israeli state that make the new anti-Semitism inevitable – though, of course, never acceptable. But, as progressive activists in an internet age we all need to be careful about what we post and about what is posted by our comrades and acquaintances. This isn't about being PC police, but about helping each other to develop a deeper and more critical political understanding, so our arguments can't become polluted with charges of anti-Semitism, so our movements don't become unwitting vehicles for spreading dangerous right-wing lies, and so we can direct our attention to the real forces behind this unequal and unstable world. German Socialists of the 1890s called anti-Semitism the 'socialism of fools' because it was used to divert criticism of the powers of capitalism into criticism of a mystical conspiracy. The posts selected and pulled together in this report tell us very little about the motivations of people attending SPSC events, but they can serve as a timely reminder of the dangers of being fooled and the importance of political education.