

INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic surges globally, antisemitic, xenophobic, and hateful messages and conspiracy theories are proliferating rapidly online. These messages spread hate and disinformation, undermine public health measures, and elevate fear and anxiety.

COVID-19-inspired antisemitic expressions constitute forms of traditional Jew hatred and malign conspiracy theories that have long plagued societies around the world. Canada is not immune. In a period of societal tension, there are increasing incidents of intolerance and antisemitic conspiracy theories which we are determined to confront. Recent incidents of antisemitism, including those related to COVID-19, have been illustrated in B'nai Brith Canada's latest [Audit of Antisemitic Incidents](#) in Canada.

Western liberal democracies, including Canada, must collectively address the threat of COVID-19-related disinformation in its broader meaning. The threat cannot be seen as only inaccurate information regarding the health impacts or deliberate attempts by governments to influence the narrative. Governments must be prepared to publicly debunk falsehoods and antisemitic conspiracy theories and other efforts to stigmatize particular groups and inflame societal tensions.

THE CONTEXT

In recent years, a shift in the phenomenon of antisemitism has seen it move from the fringes of society to the mainstream. This shift is evident in many Western societies and especially on social media. The return of traditional, classic antisemitic stereotypes as well as the intensification of anti-Israeli and Islamist antisemitism, have contributed to the growing role of antisemitism in the mainstream public discourse, most of which has proliferated through online mediums.

As the coronavirus continues to surge globally, antisemitic, xenophobic, and hateful messages and conspiracy theories are proliferating rapidly online. These messages spread hate and disinformation, make it more difficult to access accurate information about the pandemic, and elevate fear and anxiety. While some of these messages are new, many are simply old tropes repackaged for a modern pandemic.

Much of the antisemitic COVID-19-related content being shared online depicts Israel as a malicious actor that has either manufactured or is using the coronavirus to target its enemies, perpetuating longstanding antisemitic tropes repurposed for a modern-day crisis.

In the United States, the [Anti-Defamation League](#) (ADL) has catalogued recent evidence of COVID-19-related antisemitism, highlighting also the scapegoating of those of Asian descent and the promotion of homophobia. The ADL notes that some extremists on fringe platforms have gone so far as to encourage violence; those who are infected with the coronavirus should target those that these groups consider to be enemies, including Jews, law enforcement officials, political leaders and parliamentarians, and non-whites.

THE CONTEXT CONT.

There has been a significant display of COVID-19-related antisemitism in the first four months of 2020, a trend that is expected to remain stubborn in the months ahead. On April 20, 2020, Tel Aviv University's Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry and the Moshe Kantor Database for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism [released its annual report on global antisemitism](#). The report notes that, since the beginning of March, 2020, in particular, there has been a disturbing increase in accusations against Jews, Zionists and Israelis, as individuals and as a collective, for causing and spreading the coronavirus.

Accusations directed against Jews and Israel appear to be promoted mainly by both far right and far left extremists, ultra conservative Christian circles, and Islamists according to their respective ideological narratives and beliefs - such as different conspiracy theories as well as the image of the Jew as a producer and promulgator of diseases.

Blaming Jews for “*why things go wrong,*” as stated in the [IHRA 2016 Working definition of Antisemitism](#), is a common practice as old as antisemitism itself. It is quite often its most defining and replicable feature. These latest manifestations – with illustrative examples below - do not represent a new development; rather, they illustrate an acceleration. In the past, world and national calamities, natural disasters, plagues, tsunamis, earthquakes, as well as world wars and economic crises were followed by accusations of the Jews being their main perpetrators or beneficiaries.

What makes the growth in antisemitism during the COVID-19 pandemic so dangerous, are two factors. First, there is the reach of digital platforms. Those on the receiving end include people who are predisposed to conspiracy theories and feel empowered by them, as well as the impressionable who may not have the critical skills to separate fact from fiction.

Second, this global crisis has brought economic and social disruption in unprecedented fashion, quarantining vast numbers, fueling unemployment and shifting more power to governments. For [the antisemites](#), all the elements are aligned: Through devious machinations, Jews surely brought this on the world to gain power, wealth and control.

The imminent harm created by the three strands of (1) the search for scapegoats -- whether by political leaders, groups or individuals; (2) the significant impact of power of technology and social media; and (3) the anger among those who have experienced drastic and negative changes to their lives, is potentially toxic. The consequences should not be underestimated as governments respond.

The American Jewish Committee has aptly noted that, as the coronavirus makes its way through our communities, straining health care systems and transforming the daily lives of millions, we must grieve for those who have succumbed to the disease and express our sympathy and solidarity with affected families.

THE CONTEXT CONT.

We must also call on governments at every level to affirm core principles:

- **Informed leadership** > With authority comes the responsibility in a time of public health emergency to base policy on scientific expertise and pragmatism – not on superstition, prejudice, political expediency, or partisanship;
- **International cooperation** > Just as COVID-19 disregards national and state boundaries, so must the efforts to combat it – with data on testing, transmission, morbidity and mortality, as well as current and contemplated containment strategies, treatment regimens and capacity, and progress on anti-viral medication disseminated widely;
- **Openness** > Public trust in government – and individuals' willingness to sacrifice comfort and convenience, and access to family, education, social amenities, and work, for the public good – depends on governmental transparency, the assurance of the public's right to know;
- **Civility** > Crises test the human spirit, and too often summon the basest responses: bigotry, scapegoating, xenophobia, selfishness, finger-pointing. Leaders must inspire the better nature in all of us, modeling compassion, mutual respect, unity, urgency, and self-sacrifice. Citizens must follow suit.

In our increasingly globalized world, the COVID-19 pandemic may be a harbinger of this century's escalating and universal threats to public health and safety. As such, it should dispel false notions that global problems – from novel pathogens to terrorism to climate change – can be resolved by national action alone. Above all, they require urgent, thoughtful, fact-based leadership, and the maximum possible international cooperation.

As our leaders at the national, state, and local level, in concert with their counterparts around the world, confront this disease and the terrible losses it manifests, they will have – and they will need – the support of civil society, of the business community, of individuals of every faith. Combating hatred and prejudice is an essential component to this purpose.

This pandemic has demonstrated that when unfounded conspiracy theories transform themselves into criminal hate speech and incitement to violence, we must be very, very aggressive in using the legal means at our disposal to sanction those responsible. They must also be strongly and unequivocally condemned and action taken to mitigate the consequences of such dangerous provocations both online and offline.

Action must be unequivocal and strong. We must ensure countries are more forceful in condemning antisemitic movements, antisemitic conspiracy theories, and antisemitic speech and they must condemn it at the highest level, especially when it comes to online hate. Condemnation is most meaningful when specific steps are taken to implement policies that both protect and encourage targeted communities.

B'NAI BRITH CANADA'S POSITION

COVID-19-inspired antisemitic expressions constitute forms of traditional Jew hatred and malign conspiracy theories that have long plagued societies around the world. Canada is not immune. In a period of societal tension, there are increasing incidents of intolerance and antisemitic conspiracy theories which we are determined to confront. Recent incidents of antisemitism, including those related to COVID-19, have been illustrated in B'nai Brith Canada's latest [Audit of Antisemitic Incidents](#) in Canada, released April 27, 2020.

- We have observed a significant increase in COVID-19-related antisemitic posts online.
- Since March, 2019, we have received near-daily reports of antisemitic harassment, both online and in-person, in Canada.
- We have seen a significant uptick in antisemitic conspiracy theories and statements online suggesting, among other things, that:
 - » **The State of Israel created the virus** as a way to infect the planet to benefit their domestic pharmaceutical industry.
 - » **The State of Israel is deliberately spreading the virus** among Palestinians.
 - » **France's Minister of Health, who happens to be Jewish, "introduced" COVID-19** to maximize profits for French pharmaceutical companies.
 - » **Jews are uniquely disobeying self-isolation** and/or quarantine regulations and endangering the public.
 - » **Comparisons of Jews to disease-spreading rats**, similar to the medieval bubonic plague.
 - » **Jews are uniquely susceptible** to contracting and spreading COVID-19.
 - » **Instructions by white supremacists for those who are infected** with COVID-19 to spread it by any means to as many Jews as possible.
 - » **Threats of violence** against visibly observant Jews.
- We have also seen, primarily in Quebec, harassment of Jews on the basis of their appearance. Jews unaffiliated with the Kiryas Tosh community—which self-quarantined voluntarily and in cooperation with government authorities—have been turned away at stores, denied service from a variety of businesses, and told to go home under threat of violence. This has continued even after the quarantine order was lifted for the Kiryas Tosh community on April 21st.

This demonstrates how quickly a public health, economic, or political crisis, can be a breeding ground for antisemitism, or allow thinly veiled prejudices among a minority of the population rise to the surface.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

1. B'nai Brith Canada fully supports the April 17, 2020, [call for urgent action](#) to confront COVID-19-related antisemitism issued by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, who said: *"I am extremely concerned to see that certain religious leaders and politicians continue to exploit the challenging times during this pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other minorities, We must collectively reject antisemitism and other forms of intolerance and discrimination now."*

The Government of Canada should acknowledge this call and speak out in supporting it, just as it should vigorously ensure that the recommendations in [The Special Rapporteur's landmark report on antisemitism](#) of October, 2019, are concretely addressed.

2. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief has: *"urged UN member states to work with Jewish communities and organizations to strengthen monitoring of hate speech or crimes, and to develop strategies to support victims of antisemitism.... It is imperative for civil society organizations and faith-based actors to signal a zero-tolerance policy towards antisemitism online and offline."*

B'nai Brith Canada continues to urge the Government to implement [a national action plan on antisemitism](#) and to appoint a high-level domestic coordinator for this purpose. B'nai Brith Canada also reiterates its call for a concrete plan to implement the IHRA definition of antisemitism which was accepted in June, 2019, as part of Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy.

3. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief has said the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need to establish collaborative networks to foster mutual understanding, promote dialogue and inspire solidarity: *"Countering online hate speech also will not succeed if the mainstream or social media do not take seriously the reports of cyberhate targeting Jews and other minorities.... They must remove any posts that incite to hatred or violence in addition to identifying and reporting fake news"*.

B'nai Brith Canada has testified about [how to counter online hate and antisemitism](#) before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (JUST), and has offered a range of options that can be implemented by the Government of Canada.

4. Western liberal democracies – indeed, all governments, including Canada -- must collectively address the threat of COVID-19-related misinformation in its broader meaning. The threat cannot be seen as only inaccurate information regarding the health impacts or deliberate attempts by governments to influence the narrative. Governments must be prepared to publicly debunk falsehoods and correct the record as efforts are made to stigmatize parts of the population and inflame societal tensions.

B'nai Brith Canada has encouraged, and offered support to, the work of an international group of parliamentarians through the project known as '[Infotagion](#)', just as we remind Canadian parliamentarians of our proposals made to JUST.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? CONT.

5. Canada has recently signed two declarations on international collaboration to combat COVID-19 - one as a [joint Canada-EU position on countering disinformation](#), on April 14, 2020, and one by the [Alliance for Multilateralism](#), on April 16, 2020. Both documents contain sections on the need to battle disinformation.

B'nai Brith Canada calls on the Government of Canada to ensure that work on disinformation in both these contexts includes a commitment to craft clear strategies and launch campaigns to counter COVID-19-related racism, xenophobia and antisemitism.

6. The Government of Canada, through the Department of Canadian Heritage, [has created a funding envelope](#) to encourage Canadians to think critically about online health information. The bulk of the resources have been committed to organizations dealing with media and public health information accuracy - and myths about the Asian/Chinese communities in Canada.

B'nai Brith Canada believes that resources available through this initiative should include an element of countering COVID-19 disinformation and a component to battle all forms of racism and xenophobia, particularly antisemitism.

7. In May, 2019, in response to Canada's signing of the [Christchurch Call to Action](#), and creation of Canada's 'Digital Charter', representatives from B'nai Brith Canada met with elected officials, including the then-Minister of Democratic Institutions [to submit recommendations](#) on how the federal government can better combat online hatred. This included proposals to re-profile several existing funds dealing with online literacy to include a component of battling online hate. Facing the challenge of COVID-19-related antisemitism,

B'nai Brith Canada calls for further consideration by the Government of Canada of our proposals to ensure existing digital literacy programmes include a resources to confront online antisemitism.