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The B'nai Brith Audit of Antisemitic Incidents: An Unreliable and Dangerous Document

Drafted by Sheryl Nestel, PhD

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On April 21, a trustee of the Toronto District School Board retweeted a post comparing the anti-genocide protest at Columbia University to the Nazi ban on Jewish students at the University of Vienna in 1938. This hyperbolic comparison reflects the moral panic about antisemitism that has erupted in the wake of the October 7 Hamas attack and the subsequent outpouring of rage against Israel’s reprisals which have resulted in the death of nearly 40,000 Palestinians. Allegations of widespread antisemitism in Canada have penetrated the media but a careful analysis of these claims shows that

while there is a rise in antisemitic incidents, claims of imminent danger to Canadian Jews are fueling a moral panic that is both disingenuous and dangerous.

In B’nai Brith Canada’s [2023 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents](#), Richard Robertson, the organization’s Director of Research and Advocacy claims that, “Not since the Holocaust has Canada’s Jewish community faced such a legitimate threat to its survival” (Audit, P. 4). We have indeed witnessed indefensible and terrifying vandalism carried out on Jewish communal institutions including most recently gunfire aimed at Jewish schools in Toronto and Montreal and attempted arson at a synagogue in Vancouver. Thankfully, no students, staff or worshipers

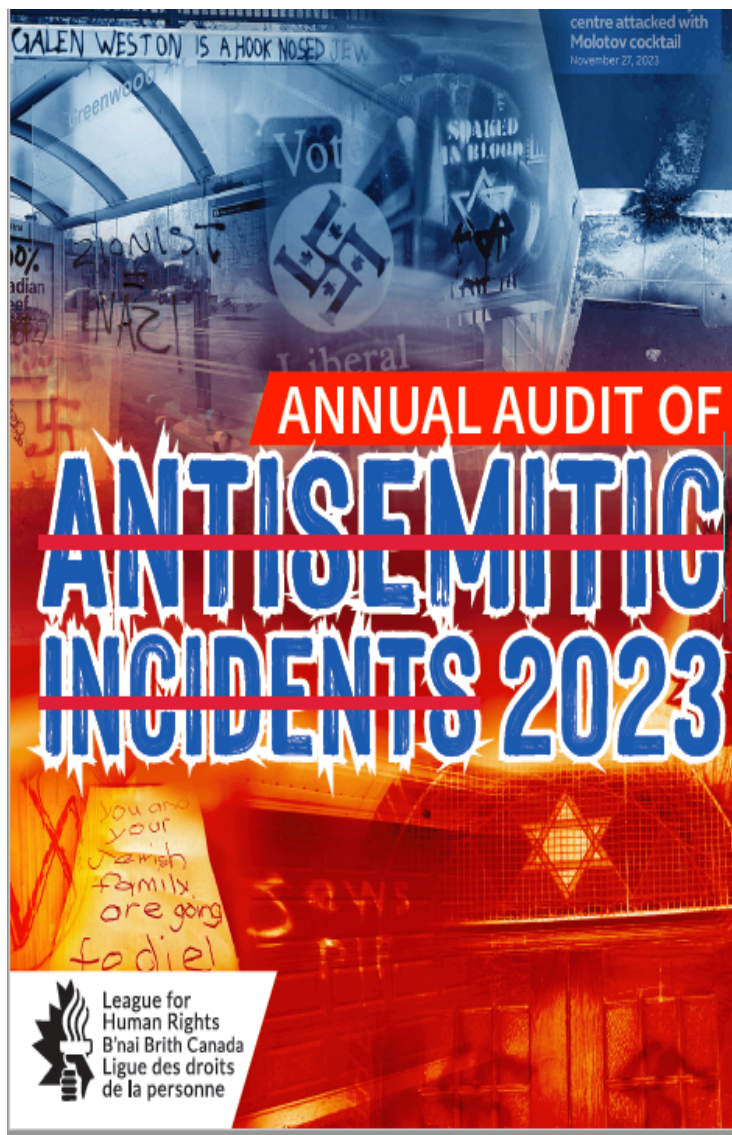
were harmed. However, it is imperative that we separate clear antisemitic threats from politically motivated ones. Accusations that the tens of thousands protesting Israel's assault on Gaza are primarily motivated by antisemitism have been central to the institutional Jewish community's lamentable attempts to rally support for Israel as it carries out what has been characterized by the International Court of Justice as [plausibly a genocide](#). As in the past, antisemitism statistics are touted as proof that we are facing an impending Nazification of Canadian society, a claim that has no credibility whatsoever.

In April, 2024 B'nai Brith Canada published its Annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents for 2023. As I argued in my [analysis](#) of the 2019 B'nai Brith Audit,

“B'nai Brith Canada cannot be understood as a neutral source for reporting on the nature and scope of antisemitism in Canada. It has both a political and a financial interest (its fundraising relies largely on its positioning as the premier opponent of antisemitism in Canada) in touting increases in antisemitism. Of course, that alone does not make its Audit suspect. But there are serious criticisms that can be levelled against the Audit itself and against B'nai Brith's specific claims about antisemitism in Canada. Chief among these are: inclusion of expressions of criticism of Israel as incidents of antisemitism, complete lack of methodological transparency, obfuscation of evidence of low levels of antisemitic sentiment among the Canadian public, and disregard of evidence of the attitudes about antisemitism of Canadian Jews themselves.”¹

¹ Recently, Jewish journalists have offered criticism similar to mine on the reliability of the antisemitism statistics published by the U.S. Anti-Defamation League. See, for example Mari Cohen, A Closer Look at the Uptick in Antisemitism, Jewish Currents, May 27, 2021 <https://jewishcurrents.org/a-closer-look-at-the-uptick-in-antisemitism>

The 2023 Audit continues to display all of these flaws and more. Let's have a look.



The fear-inducing aesthetic of the Audit is embarrassingly apparent. Comparisons to horror movie posters of a bygone era are not an exaggeration. Fewer than 10 of the Audit's 44 pages contain actual text about the 2023 data. Rather than sticking to results, the B'nai Brith Audit features 5 pages promoting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA WDA), 2 pages attacking the Health Workers Alliance for

Palestine (HAP) and 10 pages touting B'nai Brith's campaigns. Some statistics are displayed in garish 100 point typeface and screenshots appear without identifying when and where the incident occurred or on which social media platform the post was found. The Audit's 282-word methodology section is preposterously short and essentially argues that strong criticism of

Israel equates with antisemitism, therefore justifying the inclusion of instances of such criticism in the count of antisemitic incidents in Canada. The Audit foregrounds the “new antisemitism” as the most worrisome form of Jew hatred:

“In the 20th century, a new form of antisemitism emerged. This new antisemitism persecutes Jews by blaming them for the actions of the Israeli state, condemns them for their Zionistic beliefs, and/or unduly prejudices the world’s only Jewish nation state, the State of Israel (P. 11).

Criticism of Israel comes to be viewed as completely coterminous with antisemitism - one of the most egregious forms of racism of the previous century. A disingenuous conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism has been fundamental to muting and even criminalizing anti-Israel expression.

Promoting IHRA

The B’nai Brith Canada Audit vigorously promotes the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA WDA)², which is touted by pro-Israel groups and the Jewish state itself as the antidote to burgeoning antisemitism. Indeed the IHRA WDA serves as the basis for the Audit’s methodology. As noted above, 5 pages of the Audit are devoted to explaining and promoting the adoption of the IHRA WDA by governments, civil society organizations and other institutions, a [project](#) that the pro-Israel institutional Jewish

² See <https://www.noihra.ca>

community, in collaboration with the State of Israel, has been pursuing for years. Despite B'nai Brith's assertion that the IHRA is the "world's most complete and consensus-driven definition of antisemitism (p. 11), IHRA does not enjoy the broad consensus its supporters claim. Over 700 Canadian academics have signed an [open letter](#) opposing the adoption of the IHRA on university campuses and affirming that the IHRA WDA is a threat to academic freedom and freedom of expression. The Canadian Association of University Teachers, which represents tens of thousands of academic workers, unanimously passed a resolution rejecting the adoption of the IHRA on Canadian campuses. The definition is also opposed by the Canadian Federation of Students, the BC Civil Liberties Association, numerous Canadian [labour unions](#), over [40 Canadian faculty associations](#), and has been explicitly rejected by Canada's largest university, the [University of Toronto](#). In addition, [40 Jewish organizations worldwide](#) have issued a statement in opposition to its equation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. In the U.S. the IHRA WDA is opposed by the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Association of University Professors, the Center for Constitutional Rights and the National Lawyers Guild. Hundreds of prominent [Jewish studies and Holocaust scholars](#) also oppose the IHRA and see it as a threat to their own teaching and scholarship.

The push to adopt the IHRA is not an organic or grassroots initiative. It is part of a well-funded and orchestrated [Israeli government policy](#) which has been taken up by pro-Israel organizations in order to guarantee that Israeli violence against Palestinians is seen as Jewish self-defense, that annexation of Palestinian land is seen as Jewish self-determination, and that pro-Palestinian voices are effectively silenced. Despite claims that the definition is "non

legally-binding” we are seeing [mounting evidence](#) that the IHRA is being used to sanction and punish pro-Palestine scholars, students and activists. As the international Jewish group Diaspora Alliance [argues](#), the IHRA WDA “harms the fight against antisemitism, the promotion of Palestinian human rights, and the protection of freedom of expression more broadly. This is ultimately bad for Jewish people around the world, for Palestinians around the world, and for the cause of human rights globally”.

How reliable is the B’nai Brith data?

A recent [academic article](#) on the use of scientific knowledge in defining and measuring hate incidents offers some important criteria for assessing the reliability of the B’nai Brith Audit. According to Vergani et al, transparency is a key criterion for assessing the validity of a study. The B’nai Brith Audit glaringly lacks transparency. The Audit’s scant 288-word methodology section simply identifies anti-Israel expression as a central criterion for pronouncing incidents or utterances, online or in-person, as antisemitic. This flimsy scaffolding leaves the reader with numerous questions: How and when was online data, comprising [83% of the reported incidents](#), collected and from which platforms/sites? How is it ascertained to originate in Canada? Are multiple tweets posted by one user counted as one incident or several? What do we know about the demographic identities of perpetrators and complainants? When and where did the incidents reported to B’nai Brith occur? How are reported incidents verified and to what extent are they reliable? Why is there no access to anonymized raw data? This information should be key when we attempt to assess the extent and impact of antisemitism in Canada.

How does the B'nai Brith Audit compare to new academic study of Canadian antisemitism and attitudes about Israel?

In March, 2024, Prof. Robert Brym, a highly-respected scholar from the University of Toronto Department of Sociology, published a research report in the journal Canadian Jewish Studies Vol. 37 entitled [“Jews and Israel 2024: A Survey of Canadian Attitudes and Jewish Perceptions.”](#)

The contrast between Brym’s study and the B’nai Brith Audit could not be more stark. Both reports attempt to evaluate the level of antisemitism in Canadian society using different measures. While the B’nai Brith Audit reports the number of antisemitic incidents to the organization and incorporates some police data on hate crimes, it does not measure or analyse the antisemitic attitudes of individual Canadians. Brym’s study, conducted in February 2024, as the Israeli assault on Gaza was in full swing, offers a much more nuanced picture. As Brym points out, there is a broad discrepancy between his findings of low levels of antisemitism among Canadians and the B’nai Brith’s reporting of record numbers of antisemitic incidents. To some extent, this discrepancy has to do with the increased availability of digital reporting mechanisms such as B’nai Brith’s online “anti-hate mobile app.” However, Brym conjectures that rather than representing a general rise in antisemitism in Canada, an increase in the number of reported antisemitic incidents may indicate that **“a relatively small percentage of Canadians (counted by attitudinal surveys) may be responsible for a large percentage of incidents classified as antisemitic”** (p. 29).

Conflating support for Palestinian human rights with antisemitism

It is well-documented that whenever Israel launches a military attack against Palestinians, the number of reported incidents of [antisemitism rises](#). However, the broad conflation of antisemitism with justifiable support for Palestinian human rights diminishes the significance of gratuitous Jew-hatred from the white supremacist Right. Pro-Israel organizations consistently target groups on the left as antisemitic even as Brym demonstrates that antisemitic sentiment on the left is exceedingly low (p.60). Paranoid echoes of timeworn McCarthy-era anti-Communism can be discerned in the Audit's faulty conclusion that an

“important contributor to the spread of antisemitism in Canada during 2023 has been communist and socialist groups throughout the country[...] such groups have accounted for a large part of the antisemitic vitriol online, as they have come to promote antisemitism and anti-Zionism under the guise of their “anti-imperialist” and “anti-colonial” politics while using abhorrent language about Jews and Israel (p.26).

However, when Brym investigated the correlation between antisemitic attitudes and negative opinions towards Israel he found that:

For most individuals and most groups anti-Zionism is not antisemitism and pro-Zionism is not philosemitism. The correlation[...] is weak to negligible for people who identify with the hard left. [...] most members of these left-leaning groups can and do distinguish their attitudes towards Jews from their attitude toward Israel (p. 60).

And while some undeniably antisemitic expressions have been heard at pro-Palestine events, there is substantive debate about the purported antisemitic intent of some common expressions of solidarity with Palestinians such as the [slogan](#) “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” For many, this slogan expresses the yearning of Palestinians for self-determination and the end to Israeli violence and domination. When these expressions are considered to be antisemitic rather than legitimate political expression, then it should not be surprising that B’nai Brith reports a significant rise in “antisemitic incidents” as Israel brutalizes the people of Gaza and the world watches in horror.

Are levels of antisemitism in Canada a “threat to the survival” of Canada’s Jews?

As noted above, in his introduction to the B’nai Brith 2023 Audit, Richard Robertson, BBC’s Director of Research and Advocacy hyperbolically states that “not since the Holocaust has Canada’s Jewish Community faced such a legitimate threat to its survival” (p. 4). In contradistinction to the alarmist conclusions of the B’nai Brith Audit, Brym reports that non-Jewish Canadians have disproportionately positive feelings towards Jews. In the analysis of Brym’s scale measuring the range of Canadian attitudes towards Jews, just over 64% of non-Jews were seen to express the most positive attitudes toward Jews, about 19% scored at the average. And less than 17% had negative attitudes toward Jews. Brym concludes that Canadians’ attitudes toward Jews are disproportionately positive. According to Brym **“Contrary to the picture painted by many media outlets these results do not suggest that a wave of antisemitism has engulfed the general population”** (p. 34). This conclusion corresponds with the [Anti Defamation League’s](#) survey of antisemitic attitudes from 100 countries around the

world. According to the ADL, 8% of Canadians hold antisemitic attitudes. Only Sweden, at 4% and the Netherlands at 5% are considered less antisemitic.

Jews' perception of anti-Jewish discrimination since Oct. 7.

In Brym's 2024 study, Jewish Canadians, despite generally enjoying significant racial, educational and economic privilege, ranked themselves as the group facing the most discrimination in Canada. This signals a sea-change from the results of a [2018 survey](#) in which Canadian Jews ranked themselves as the fifth most discriminated-against group in Canada (Indigenous Canadians were ranked as number one). This self-ranking challenges both common sense and Canadian reality. Since 2017, 11 Muslims have been [murdered](#) in Canada in what are apparent [hate crimes](#). According to the [National Council of Canadian Muslims](#), Canada suffered more mass killings motivated by Islamophobia between 2017 and 2021 than any other country in the G7. While there is definitely an uptick in antisemitic harassment and vandalism, no Jews have been murdered and incidents of physical violence against Jews have thankfully been rare.

The B'nai Brith Audit must be seen as a key instrument shaping Jews' perceived sense of marginalization by blurring the lines between individual Jews and the State of Israel. Israel, as scholar Neve Gordon [argues](#), serves as "an avatar of Jewish identity" (p. 6) and condemnations of Israeli violence are therefore experienced by some Jews as a personal existential threat. Relying on hyperbole and opacity, the Audit plays no small part in creating Jewish fear. As Gordon argues, the pro-Zionist imperative, which is pervasive in Canadian Jewish life, creates "a particular emotional orientation towards and alignment with Israel, which involves

apprehending those who criticize Israel and Zionism as *fearsome* because they ostensibly deny the right not only of Israel to exist, but also [...] the right of the Jewish collective and each individual Jew to exist” (p. 5). This form of self-subalternization, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, represents a disturbing form of willful ignorance and undermines the possibility of reciprocal solidarity in the struggle against antisemitism and all forms of racism. Demonizing and punishing those who champion Palestinian human rights and freedoms, many of whom are racialized, drives a wedge between many who genuinely want to fight antisemitism and those fighting other forms of racist oppression. As such, it makes Jews less safe, not more so, since our safety is secured through solidarity.

Is there consensus in the Jewish Community about rising antisemitism and support for Israel?

The Audit takes special care to discredit and demonize Canadian Jews who stray from what the institutional Jewish community claims is the Jewish communal consensus supporting Israel. This claim intentionally obscures widespread dissent in Jewish communities worldwide and discounts the thousands of Jews who have organized and demonstrated against Israel’s war on Gaza and are now swelling the ranks of Jewish anti-Zionist groups such as Independent Jewish Voices Canada and Jewish Voice for Peace in the U.S. In the quote below, the dissenters are portrayed as being manipulated by outside forces rather than as a spontaneous and principled response to the moral challenge posed by the war on Gaza. According to the Audit:

Fringe voices who obfuscate Jewish values and create misconceptions about mainstream Jewish beliefs related to Israel have routinely been sponsored and promoted to appear at teach-ins and extracurricular seminars by university departments across the country (p. 26).

Brym challenges the characterization of dissenting Jews as “fringe” actors. According to his study, 28% of Canadian Jews with an opinion on this subject characterized Israel’s response to the Oct. 7 Hamas attack as “excessive” (p.67) and 51% of those Jews with an opinion on the subject felt that Israel has no right to build settlements in the West Bank.

Brym concludes that

Most Jewish community leaders (who are unelected) and their spokespersons evidently do not share such opinions. They have claimed that Jewish critics of Israeli government policy are an insignificant and marginal minority. The findings of this study challenge the leadership’s claim (p. 71).

The rise in antisemitic incidents

Finally, to return to an observation from my analysis of the 2019 B’nai Brith Audit, the disproportionality between reported antisemitic incidents in Canada and those reported by the Anti-Defamation League in the U.S. should engender skepticism about the Audit. B’nai Brith’s 2019 Audit claimed that an equal number of antisemitic incidents had taken place in Canada and the U.S., despite the fact that the U.S. has a population 9 times that of Canada and has 17

times as many Jews. The Anti-Defamation League's 2023 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents reported a record 8,873 incidents. And while they claim that some online incidents are included in the Audit, online antisemitism is notably downplayed. Indeed as the ADL firmly states, "the Audit does not attempt to assess the total amount of antisemitism online." The B'nai Brith Audit on the other hand, reports a total of 5,791 incidents, 4847 of which took place online. These numbers represent 2/3 of the total incidents reported in the U.S. We are led to conclude then that Canadian Jews experience six times more antisemitism per capita than their U.S. counterparts. This conclusion is in no way credible. When B'nai Brith claims that 16 antisemitic incidents take place every day in Canada (p. 7) they fail to mention that the vast majority of these are taking place online and are vetted using the IHRA WDA.³ The intentional use of this rhetorical device leads the reader to mistakenly believe that violence, assault and in-person harassment is an everyday occurrence in Canada. It is not surprising then that Jews reading this report would consider themselves under siege. Conflating legitimate criticism of the government and policies of Israel with classic antisemitic sentiment has led to a gross inflation of antisemitism statistics.

Conclusion

The 2023 B'nai Brith Annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents once again leaves us with an incomplete and highly politicized picture of antisemitism in Canada. It is fair to say that the sensationalized contents and deliberately inflammatory design of the Audit contribute to creating a moral panic around perceived antisemitism that is uncritically embraced by some in

³ The Anti-Defamation League revised their methodology for collecting antisemitism statistics after October 7, 2023. They now utilize the IHRA WDA to determine whether an incident is antisemitic or not. This revised methodology resulted in a 43% increase in antisemitic incidents reported in the ADL Audit.

the Jewish community and by many opportunistic politicians. While we are witnessing a definitive uptick in antisemitism worldwide we desperately need clarity about the sources and actual scope of antisemitic sentiment. B'nai Brith is more concerned with using allegations of antisemitism as a cudgel to suppress criticism of Israel than providing reliable data on this form of racism. Prof. Robert Brym's recent report, boasting methodological clarity and breadth, is an important corrective to B'nai Brith's shallow analysis and inadequate documentation.