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Anti-Israeli Sentiment in Ireland Is Getting Worse



People attend a protest in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, in Dublin, Ireland, November 18, 2023. (Clodagh Kilcoyne/Reuters)

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Recent cultural and political controversies in Ireland suggest a worrying — and growing — hostility to Israel.

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus is asked why Ireland has “the honour of being the only country that has never persecuted the Jews.” When he can't answer, he's told it's because Ireland “never let them in.” Despite the fact that the Jewish population there is very small, antisemitic prejudice in Ireland — and in the United Kingdom — has been a recurring issue.

Outside of the sports' pages, Ireland's international basketball games usually pass without much notice. Last Thursday's Women's EuroBasket 2025 qualifier game between Ireland and Israel was an exception. It was originally slated to take place last November in Israel, but, because of conflict in the region, it was rescheduled to a neutral venue in the Latvian capital, Riga. The venue may have been neutral, but everything else about this game quickly became toxic.

Basketball Ireland (BI), the sport's governing body, had been under sustained pressure to boycott the game. However, as the organization noted, "FIBA Europe has not excluded Israel from competing internationally," so a unilateral Irish boycott would be "an effective 5-year ban from competing at international level" for Ireland. The organization's CEO said, "I'm not prepared to destroy my sport for a gesture that will have no impact." There would be no boycott.

Unwittingly, the Israeli Basketball Association reignited the controversy. It posted on its website photos of IDF soldiers visiting a team practice session. Then, a U.S.-based Israeli team member, Dor Saar, told the website, "It's known that they are quite antisemitic, and it's no secret." In the febrile anti-Israeli atmosphere in Ireland, this set the cat among the pigeons.

BI blasted the comments as "inflammatory and wholly inaccurate" and stated, "There would be no formal handshakes before or after the game, while our players will line up for the Irish national anthem by our bench, rather than [*sic*] the centre court."

Alan Shatter, a former Irish minister for justice and the last Jewish member of the Irish parliament, told me this week: "There's a perception in Israel that Ireland is filled with people who are not just anti-Israeli but antisemitic and that Ireland is the most anti-Israeli country in the EU." He continued:

Remember, a large number of Israeli women of a similar age to these basketball players were murdered, raped, sexually mutilated, kidnapped, and many are still being held hostage in Gaza. You would expect young Irish women to have sympathy for the plight of these Israeli women, just as it is entirely acceptable that they have sympathy for Palestinian women and children in Gaza.

If you wanted to disprove that Ireland is riddled with antisemites, perhaps the thing to have done would have been to shake hands and exchange gifts while also wishing an end to the dreadful death and destruction in Gaza. It could have had a positive impact on Israeli perceptions. Instead, the Irish players just took one side.

The controversy has also thrown into sharp relief Ireland's problematic relationship with Jews and, more recently, with the Israeli state.

Although Ireland historically had a small Jewish population, there was one anti-Jewish pogrom in Limerick in 1904. Sparked by an antisemitic tirade by a Catholic priest, a boycott of local Jewish businesses caused most of the city's 35 Jewish families to flee. Limerick City Council recently passed a motion supporting the anti-Israeli boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign, which places yellow stickers on Israeli products — reminiscent of the yellow badges once used by the Nazis to designate Jews.

Perhaps this shouldn't be too surprising in the context of 20th-century history. Hitler had some influential supporters in Ireland. One of them was Charles Bewley, the most senior Irish diplomat in Germany from 1933 to 1939. Bewley abused his consular position by delaying and obstructing Irish-visa applications by Jews trying to flee Nazi Germany — fewer than 100 such applications were processed during his six-year tenure. Other supporters could be found among Ireland's extreme nationalists. At the outbreak of war in 1939, the IRA issued a statement: "If German forces should land in Ireland, they will land as friends and liberators." Later the IRA welcomed the "cleansing fire" of the Wehrmacht that was "driving the Jews out of Europe." The IRA promised that, on coming to power in Ireland, they would also "rid the country of such vermin." In 1940, while Zionist armed groups fought the British in Palestine, Seán Russell, the IRA chief of staff, was in Berlin seeking assistance from German foreign-affairs minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and the German military-intelligence chief, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. The plan was to launch a sabotage campaign against Allied (including American) servicemen stationed in Northern Ireland.

Russell died while returning to Ireland on a German U-boat. In 2003, a statue to Russell was rededicated to him in Dublin by the current Sinn Féin president, Mary Lou McDonald. It's the only public monument to a Nazi collaborator anywhere in Europe.

And yet there was great sympathy for Ireland's struggle for independence among the Zionists fighting the British in Mandatory Palestine. According to MI5 files released in 2003, they regarded themselves as "the Zionist Sinn Féin." Yitzhak Shamir, the leader of the Stern Gang and future Israeli prime minister, adopted the nom de guerre "Michael" in tribute to the Irish revolutionary leader Michael Collins.

This sympathy has not been reciprocated by Sinn Féin. In 2006, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, the party's deputy in the Irish parliament, described Israel as "one of the most abhorrent and despicable regimes on the planet." Another Sinn Féin deputy, Réada Cronin, compared Israeli embassy staff to monkeys and tweeted that Israel had "taken Nazism to a new level." Sinn Féin now leads the government in Northern Ireland and could well be the largest party in the Republic of Ireland after the next election, although it has registered a marked fall in its popularity in recent polls.

A possible reason for that decline may be Sinn Féin's position on one hot-button issue. While the party is officially in favor of immigration, polls suggest that a large majority of its supporters oppose it. A recent, harrowing documentary, based on a best-selling book *Face Down*, about the IRA murder of a German businessman that was shown on RTÉ and BBC TV, may also have influenced that fall in popularity.

Nonetheless, according to ex-minister Shatter, Israel's problem in Ireland is not confined to Sinn Féin. "After over 30 years in Irish politics, I have no doubt that there is a covert element of antisemitism and that the selective narrative of the Irish government is escalating this antisemitism."

In October 2021, 47 states signed a United Nations Human Rights Council pledge to combat antisemitism; Ireland did not. This week, Irish prime minister Leo Varadkar told parliament, “It’s very clear to me that Israel is not listening to any country in the world. . . . They have become blinded by rage.”

During the 1956 Suez crisis, the Irish minister for external relations called on the Israelis and Arabs to solve their differences “in a spirit of Christian charity.” When it was pointed out that neither party was Christian, Minister Liam Cosgrave explained that while he may be addressing the U.N. Assembly, he was really talking to his constituents back in Ireland. This is not atypical of the largely transactional attitude to the Arab–Israeli conflict, by which an official policy of neutrality persisted until the ’70s.

As Ireland is a predominantly Catholic country, public attitudes toward Israel have not always been as negative as they are now. There was great pride in Ireland when Chaim Herzog — who grew up in Dublin — became president of Israel. Herzog reciprocated by visiting Ireland to help smooth over past difficulties and build understanding. The current president of Israel is his son, Isaac Herzog.

But today, for the first time in many decades, there are no Jewish deputies in the Irish parliament, and Ireland’s Jewish population is now a fraction of what it was even when Joyce wrote *Ulysses*. In that novel, he presented — among other things — a scathing depiction of virulent antisemitism in Ireland. Things do not seem to have changed much since then.