

European and External Relations Committee: International Engagement Inquiry
Evidence from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is the representative body of all of the Jewish Communities in Scotland. Our remit does not include international affairs, and, in particular, it is not our remit to lobby for any particular view on the Middle East, not least because Jewish people in Scotland hold as wide a variety of views about current Israeli politics as do non-Jewish people, and it is not difficult to find Jewish supporters of all positions in Israeli politics. We are, however, concerned by anything which has an adverse effect on the Jewish community in Scotland, and it is undoubtedly the case that media reporting about the Middle East, and of local comment about the Middle East – not necessarily of Israel or Palestine – results in an increase in the number of antisemitic incidents in Scotland.

Criticism of Israel as a state and of any particular Israeli government is entirely legitimate, as is criticism of Scotland, the UK, US or any other state. However, there is clear evidence that 'Israel' and 'Jewish' are often conflated or even used interchangeably, so that what purports to be criticism of Israel becomes explicit antisemitism. (A heckler at a recent Oxford Union debate who reportedly called for Jews to be slaughtered, justified himself to a reporter by saying that "*Jew' and 'Israel' were interchangeable terms*". (*Student says 'slaughter the Jews' remark was misunderstood*, Independent, 12 February 2010); a vandal convicted of antisemitic daubings in Kilmarnock told the Sheriff in 'mitigation' that he "had taken umbrage against Israel" (January 2005).)

The Jewish community in Scotland feels particularly vulnerable at the present time because of an increase in antisemitic incidents that is almost certainly related to conflict in the Middle East. Examples of these include the conviction of Mohammed Sandia in Edinburgh Sheriff Court for posting antisemitic comments on the Scotsman website, including "*jews are not fit to breathe our air. They must be attacked wherever you see them; throw rocks at their ugly, hooked nose women and mentally ill children, light up the REAL ovens.*" (*sic*). His defence lawyer claimed, in mitigation of the offence, that Sandia was "*an ardent supporter of the Palestinian cause*". Other recent incidents have included graffiti reading "SNP/Hamas/Kill the Jews" daubed on gravestones and a wall in a Glasgow Jewish cemetery, a 1am telephone call by a caller who refused to give his name but said that "*we hate Israel and we hate the Jewish conspiracy*", and several anonymous letters describing Jews in terms such as "*bloodsucking parasites*", and "*megalomaniacal yid-kike-fuck*" who must be "*totally exterminated*", or "*destroyed entirely and none remain*".

The Community Security Trust reports¹ that the number of incidents throughout the whole of the UK reached the all-time high of 924 in 2009. The previous highest figure, in 2006, was "only" 598. Thirty incidents were recorded in Scotland during 2009, a three-fold increase on the 2008 figure.

Whilst the First Minister is on record as saying "*you can't have normal relationships if you believe another country has been involved in what Israel has been involved in*" (*Question Time*, 25 March 2010), we are aware of no similar statements from the Scottish Government in respect of China, Burma, Korea, Darfur, etc – all countries

¹ Antisemitic Incidents Report 2009
<http://www.thecst.org.uk/docs/CST-incidents-report-09-for-web.pdf>

about which there are well-documented concerns about Human Rights. This particularity makes many in the Jewish community, the majority of whom have family and friends in Israel, feel very vulnerable, whatever their views on the conflict with the Palestinians may be. Antisemitism is not just physical violence or verbal abuse against Jews. It is treating Jews differently - not just individuals, but collectives too. So when the Jewish state is uniquely singled out for criticism and boycott although acting no differently from other states, then that is as much antisemitism as the desecration of a synagogue.

We would draw the Committee's attention to an incident that occurred following Public Petition Committee consideration of PE779, which related to Israel and Palestine. On that occasion antisemitic graffiti were daubed on a wall on Regent Road above the Parliament, and we were informed by Lothian and Borders police that they connected the incident with the Committee discussion earlier the same day. We do not for one moment believe that any member of the Public Petitions Committee intentionally said anything to encourage or provoke antisemitism. Nor do we believe that the First Minister, in his comment quoted above had any such intention. On the contrary, we are confident that the Scottish Government would explicitly condemn any antisemitic incident. Indeed, the First Minister has described the abovementioned graffiti at a Glasgow Jewish cemetery as "deranged", and, in his response to a recent parliamentary question, the Minister for Community Safety stated that "*the Scottish Government takes any incidents of anti-Semitic behaviour as of the utmost gravity ... We condemn and abhor anti-Semitic views and anti-Semitic behaviour.*"² However, we remain concerned that, in the current climate, some people may be willing to (mis)interpret statements in a manner to suit their own views, and to misuse them as an excuse to target Jewish people in Scotland.

We would, therefore, urge the Inquiry to recognise the potential impact that foreign policy statements may have on local communities in Scotland, and to recommend that the Scottish Government should take into account not only the content of statements and substance of international engagement, but also the language and tone in which these are presented, in order to minimise the possibility of accidental or deliberate misinterpretation.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges. SCoJeC is Scottish Charity SC029438, and its aims are to advance public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community. It works with others to promote good relations and understanding among community groups and to promote equality, and represents the Jewish community in Scotland to government and other statutory and official bodies on matters affecting the Jewish community.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.

² S3W-37794 <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/Apps2/Business/PQA/default.aspx?pq=S3W-37794>