

Presenter: David Rich, Community Security Trust

Title: **“Why is the British Left anti-Israel?”**

Panel: Israel Studies

Relations between British Jews and the Labour Party have been in freefall since the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader in 2015. Repeated antisemitic statements by leading Labour Party figures and grassroots activists have created a sense that the party has an institutional problem that it is incapable or unwilling to solve. Yet Labour was originally Britain’s most pro-Zionist party that enjoyed mass Jewish support. This change is the consequence of a radical anti-Zionism that first emerged on the radical fringes of the Left in the 1960s and has now become mainstream. For many on the Left, Israel is not the fulfilment of legitimate Jewish national aspirations, but is in fact a colonial settler state and an agent of Western imperialism. This has brought with it a set of antisemitic ideas, mainly involving conspiracy theories or the association of Zionism with Nazism, that have become normalised and widespread. There are many reasons why this has happened: Britain’s colonial record in Palestine; Israel’s close alliance with the United States; the legacy of Soviet and other radical anti-Zionist propaganda; the changing nature of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict itself; and the impact of pro-Palestinian campaign groups on British political opinion. This anti-Israel fervour on the radical Left has antisemitic consequences. In the 1970s and 1980s, Jewish students found their Jewish societies banned at some British Universities. Today, Leftists view Hamas and Hezbollah as progressive movements and see Zionism as nothing more than a form of racism. Meanwhile, many on the Left think that antisemitism is solely an extreme right wing problem and cannot recognise left wing or Islamist antisemitism. Instead, racism is understood as a phenomenon based on colour that manifests as socio-economic exclusion, and therefore does not affect Jews. At a time when populist leaders actively encourage anger and resentment to build their movements and motivate their supporters, antisemitism has become a national political issue in Britain as a result of Labour – Britain’s supposedly anti-racist party.