

Use of 'Zionist' normalised antisemitism: Jewish leader

EXCLUSIVE

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Government hesitation helped antisemitism flourish in the lead up to the Bondi massacre, one of the nation's top Jewish leaders has argued in an emotional royal commission submission that decries the use of the terms "Zionist" and "genocide supporter" to attack Jews in Australia.

Zionist Federation of Australia president Jeremy Leibler, writing in a personal capacity, said the key covenants that underpinned Jewish community life in Australia since the Holocaust had been shattered following the October 7 attacks and subsequent war in Gaza, as Jewish Australians became targeted because of the conflict in the Middle East.

"What I have observed since 7 October 2023 is the systematic erosion of the psychological safety that Jewish Australians once took for granted," Leibler wrote. "This erosion has occurred across every sphere of public life."

The release of his submission came as royal commissioner Virginia Bell prepared to hand down an interim report today addressing policing and security failures that contributed to the attack that killed 15 people at a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach.

Leibler argued that, despite attempts by the Albanese government to respond to the increase in attacks on Jewish Australians, a failure to move decisively enough to stamp out the surge "emboldened the forces that ultimately produced the violence at Bondi".

"On 14 December 2025, the connection between unchecked rhetoric and physical violence was made horrifyingly concrete," he wrote.

"The persons who carried out the Bondi attack did not act in a vacuum. They acted in a climate in which 'Zionists' could be boycotted, harassed, intimidated, and ultimately, violently attacked."

Leibler said Jewish Australians received "hesitancy and calculation" from political leaders after the October 7 attacks, when they needed urgency and moral clarity.

He stressed he was not accusing the Albanese government of being antisemitic, and praised the prime minister for increasing security funding for Jewish groups, passing laws to combat doxxing and inviting Israeli President Isaac Herzog to visit Australia in February.

"What the government could not bring itself to do was confront the antisemitic rhetoric that was dehumanising Jews in the public square. It failed to draw a clear line when protests crossed from legitimate free expression into incitement," he wrote.

"It calculated that confrontation would cost more politically than silence. The result was that for over two years, the Jewish community

watched while hatred was normalised in plain sight."

In January, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told relatives of the victims of the Bondi attack he was "deeply and profoundly sorry that we could not protect your loved ones from this evil".

Albanese previously said "all governments should have done better" to combat anti-Jewish discrimination, as he defended his move to appoint the first special envoy for combating antisemitism.

Drawing on his role as a partner at law firm Arnold Bloch Leibler, which has acted pro bono for clients who experienced antisemitism and discrimination, Leibler cited examples of a university student evicted by housemates for being identified as a Zionist, children suffering abuse at school and campaigns to "deplatform" Jewish artists from festivals.



Zionist Federation of Australia president Jeremy Leibler.

He recounted walking through Melbourne when his young children expressed alarm that a nearby state school did not have armed guards, before realising that was because it was not a Jewish school.

"That moment is, for me, the most important thing I can tell this commission," Leibler said.

"The fact that my children, who are growing up in Melbourne in 2026, have internalised as normal the idea that Jewish institutions require armed protection and non-Jewish institutions do not."

Leibler said health professionals had been targeted because of perceived sympathy for Israel, while non-profit rights organisations and community legal centres had become "environments of hostility and exclusion" for many Jewish staff.

"What connected all these matters was the use of the word 'Zionist' as a proxy for 'Jew'," he wrote. "It is the mechanism by which antisemitism is laundered into acceptable speech."

Zionism describes the belief that Jewish people should have a nation in their ancestral homeland, and is commonly understood to mean support for the existence of Israel.

Leibler's submission is one of more than 3500 lodged with the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion.