



# THE CHANGING FORMS OF INCITEMENT TO TERROR AND VIOLENCE: The Need for a New International Response



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# ANTI-ZIONISM, THE LEFT, AND THE ISLAMISTS IN BRITAIN

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My topic concerns primarily the United Kingdom, and two important, even major facets of the contemporary incitement against Israel and the Jewish people, which are increasingly visible in British society. I will focus primarily on the left wing of the political spectrum, and to some extent on Muslims in British society, and the way these groups interact in the area of anti-Israeli incitement. Of course there are many other forces at work in promoting anti-Semitism in the UK. But for the sake of brevity, I will only discuss these two currents.

## AN UNWRITTEN ALLIANCE

Since the year 2000 there has been an increasing convergence between those who belong to the radical left and those who promote Islamism in British society. One of the key areas in cementing their rapprochement has been the question of Israel and Palestine. There are also other factors such as anti-Western sentiment, antiglobalization, and anti-Americanism that provide common ground for Marxists and Islamists alike.

The unwritten alliance between these forces, which clearly have many things that divide them as well as points in common, is undoubtedly related to events in the Middle East since 2000-2001. The Iraq War, the Second Intifada and Operation Defensive Shield, the Second Lebanon War, and the Gaza Flotilla have been obvious triggers. They were not necessarily deep causes, but certainly catalysts of anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism. In this context, the demonization of Jews and of Zionism has increasingly appeared as a motif actively promoted by Islamists and far-left groups. But in the case of hostility toward Israel in British society there is a much larger hinterland of support embracing many liberals and the moderate left. This is one of the most disturbing features of more recent developments. Many liberal democrats, a number of conservatives, and some supposedly enlightened intellectuals in Britain (as indeed in much of Western Europe) are today one-sidedly antagonistic toward Israel.

Palestine has in recent decades, and especially since the year 2000, become the favorite paradigmatic case of oppression for left-wing militants despite far bloodier events around the world including massacres in Africa and on other continents. In the Manichean approach adopted by anti-Zionist groups in British society, Israelis are not only bad guys; they are the embodiment of absolute wickedness and capitalist-imperialist evil. On the other side, the Palestinians represent absolute purity, regardless of the atrocities they have committed. Amazingly, this has not been affected by the Arab revolutions of 2011 despite their revelation of the cruelty, corruption, and cynicism of Arab regimes, especially Libya and Syria; or their

exposure of the marginality of Israel and the “Palestine question” to the key issues of the Middle East.

Broadly speaking, Israel is perceived by much of the British left and by the Islamists as being white, Western, and utterly foreign to the Middle East—in other words, as brutal colonialist invaders. The whole story of the Zionist project is depicted as that of a foreign invasion and the stealing of an indigenous people’s land. That is the bottom line of the entire Palestinian narrative, which to an astonishing extent has been swallowed hook, line, and sinker by much of British and West European elite opinion. The Palestinians (with only the feeblest of Israeli hasbara responses) have been successfully cast in the role of “Jews,” downtrodden and ruthlessly abused by Nazi-like Israelis.

To this grossly distorted vision we should add the popular but corrosive and mendacious image of Israel as an “apartheid state.” These perceptions are already a pillar of the Islamist-leftist discourse, adopted by growing numbers of liberal “critics” of Israel. Many of these libels are endlessly duplicated throughout Western Europe—in Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, as well as France and Germany. In Britain these misleading amalgams have achieved considerable resonance and intellectual respectability. They are even part of mainstream discourse in *The Guardian*, or *The Independent*, or in Marxist publications like the *New Left Review*.

Anti-Zionism is equally endemic in the *London Review of Books*, a prestigious elite opinion-forming journal that has never, in the last twenty years, published a single article on the Israeli-Arab conflict that could be considered balanced (let alone pro-Israeli). It has, however, printed many hostile pieces, often written by leftist Diaspora Jews or anti-Israeli Israelis. The use of Jewish accusers obviously provides a useful alibi against charges of bias, discrimination, and anti-Semitism, but that should fool nobody. The BBC has also over the years made its own unique contribution to delegitimizing Israel, and it is still immensely influential through its television and radio programs, which have a worldwide impact. There has been some slight improvement in its coverage more recently—in response perhaps to the Iranian threat and the Arab revolutions.

## ISLAMISTS, ISRAEL, AND BRITISH SOCIETY

The impact of the Islamists on British society is more difficult to measure. Clearly, the militants form only a small minority within the broader Muslim community of the UK, which currently numbers close to three million people. With the Jewish population of Britain standing at about three hundred thousand, that makes a ratio of approximately ten Muslims to every Jew in the UK today. There is a similar ratio in France, except that there are six million Muslims and about six hundred thousand Jews in the contemporary French Republic. The relations between Muslims and Jews in both countries have had their ups and downs, but they remain tense. There is no doubt that the Anglo-Jewish community is worried (with good reason) about the radicalization of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish feelings among young Muslims and about propaganda that teaches hatred of Jews as “the sons of apes and pigs.”

At the same time, feelings toward Muslims within the British public are also becoming more antagonistic after a decade of high-profile terrorism, growing awareness of the threat of jihad, and the aggressive declarations by some Muslim clerics about the need to impose Sharia law in the UK. Iran, too, is a country that inspires considerable loathing in the UK

ever since the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa, over twenty years ago, inviting Muslims to murder British author Salman Rushdie. But the undoubted antipathy to Iran does not diminish the hostility to Israel in many quarters of British society.

The anti-Israeli obsession has steadily seeped into the chattering classes, the free professions, the churches, and nongovernmental organizations. It is especially virulent in academia. When I was a student in the UK in the mid-1970s, already then we had to fight against a well-organized anti-Israeli delegitimization campaign that was encouraged by the notorious 1975 United Nations resolution equating Zionism and racism. The Palestinians and the left-wing student radicals (especially Trotskyites) actively sought to ban Jewish societies on campus. At that time they failed.

Today, however, anti-Zionism is much better funded, more respectable, popular, and streamlined. It is, moreover, in tune with the postcolonial Zeitgeist. One factor in this anti-Zionist transformation is the growing attention paid in the UK to British Muslim opinion and the broad sympathy with the Palestinian cause among British elites. This trend accelerated beginning in the early 1980s, though little attention was paid to it then by decision-makers in Jerusalem. Awareness of the dangers of delegitimization has taken decades to fully penetrate the heads of a rather narrow-minded and sometimes arrogant Israeli political, security, and media establishment. This is also true of the Anglo-Jewish leadership, which until very recently acted as if it was unaware of the gravity of the dangers confronting the Jewish community in Britain.

The left-wing, liberal-democrat, and Muslim efforts to "Nazify" Israel and thereby invert the Holocaust have played a significant role in cementing the new convergence of interests between the British left and the Islamists. The abuse of the Holocaust as a political weapon against the Jewish state has indeed become increasingly rampant. Many Islamists openly deny the Holocaust (not only in Iran) and this has gradually penetrated into parts of the Muslim Diaspora. There are also a number of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories eagerly espoused by Muslim radicals that either openly use or echo the wild fantasies of "Jewish world domination" in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In addition, on the British left there is a "soft" version of *The Protocols* that evokes the pernicious "Zionist Lobby" and the insidious, hidden power of "Jewish moneybags."

Such anti-Semitic topoi periodically surface in British political debate. Only last year a Labor MP, Sir Gerald Kaufman—a well-known Jewish accuser of Israel—misleadingly referred to the Conservative Party as being funded by reactionary Jewish millionaires. He was cashing in on the stereotypical notion that successful Jews are rich and sinister conspirators who are always to be found on the side of such imperialist reaction.

Such attitudes were already rampant on the British left (especially among the trade unions) as far back as the protests against the Boer War around 1900. It is significant that since the mass demonstrations against the war in Iraq some ten years ago, there has been considerable cooperation between left-wing and anti-Zionist Trotskyite movements such as the Socialist Workers Party (which have considerable extraparliamentary influence) and Islamic organizations like the Muslim Council of Britain. Anti-Semitism has been further stimulated by the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the racist anti-Jewish material that is funded by Saudi Arabia and openly preached in the British mosques or on sale in Islamist bookshops. The "decadent" Western culture that the radical Muslims constantly execrate is seen as being controlled and dominated by Jews. This adds a further inflammatory dimension to Muslim anti-Semitism, which on this point has many affinities

with the neofascist right. The message of the jihadists is far more explicitly genocidal in its incitement than its equivalents in left-wing anti-Israeli propaganda, but it is the latter that provides the intellectual legitimacy.

## A RISING TIDE OF HATE

Finally, there is the boycott. Britain today is the world center of the academic boycott and also of trade-union efforts to economically sanction Israel. The trade unions are still a powerful force in British society. Millions of members at least nominally support an economic boycott of Israel. For the moment it may be confined to produce coming from the West Bank, but the aim goes beyond that. The TUC (Trades Union Congress), the General Transport and Workers Union, UNISON (the public workers union), and the major British unions in general have been effectively hijacked by the anti-Zionist Palestine Solidarity Committee. The academic unions have repeatedly passed resolutions that denounce Israel as an “apartheid state.” They call for cutting all links with Israeli universities—ending scientific, technical, and other cooperation. If it were not for a legal opinion that pronounced such measures to be discriminatory, the effects would already have been far more severe. These trends also exist elsewhere, but only in Britain has the boycott achieved such a level of legitimacy—even though most Britons would almost certainly oppose a boycott of Israel in any truly democratic vote.

Incitement against Israel in many circles in Britain, especially the elites, is increasingly brazen. In just one example from 2011, a criminal court trial took place after the ransacking of a factory near Brighton that was producing armaments that were also to be exported to Israel. About two hundred thousand pounds’ worth of damage was done to the factory. The judge, however, issued an eighty-seven-page statement that in the most partisan way basically justified the perpetrators. This summation was not the work of a militant Muslim or a leftist anti-Semite but of a respectable judge within the independent British judiciary. The criminals in this case were, of course, acquitted as a result of his remarkably biased instructions. He spoke angrily about Gaza as a “hellhole on earth” and even managed to blame Israel for the assault on the factory, implying that the Israel Defense Forces were nothing more than an army of child killers. This incident is only one of many that reveal the erosion of barriers against the demonization of the Jewish state in Britain.

In the current toxic atmosphere of debate, even to raise such issues is all-too-often to be suspected in “enlightened” circles of being a “Zionist lackey,” an Islamophobe, or a racist. Moreover, in so-called “progressive” as well as Islamist or liberal and conservative circles, one often encounters a vehement denial of the existence of anti-Semitism—except when it comes from the far right or unrepentant neo-Nazis. Almost a decade ago the radical British poet Tom Paulin, like many on the left, did not hesitate to brand any allusion to anti-Semitism as a cynical ploy by the Israeli government and its “Zionist” lackeys. This is also the position today of prominent left-wing politicians like Ken Livingstone or George Galloway.

One consequence of this denial syndrome is that during the past decade, Britain has been sleepwalking into a morass of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish prejudice, which bodes ill for its future and that of its Jewish community.



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