



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



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ON ANTI-ZIONISM AND ANTI-ISRAELISM

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The subject I wish to address here does not fall directly within the definition of “incitement to terror,” or “incitement,” or even “terror.” Although it is undoubtedly linked to the issue of terror or incitement to terror, it is broader and in particular harder to define, identify, pinpoint, and comprehend. In many ways it is an even more important phenomenon than the violence that results from what we commonly refer to as “terror,” and in the long term also more dangerous.

Perhaps the time has come to adopt a new term: *anti-Israelism* (or perhaps for linguistic expediency, *anti-Israeliness*). The addition of the suffix “ism” to the fairly commonly used term anti-Israeli has various implications: first and foremost it indicates the emergence of a *phenomenon*. And today we are indeed faced with a phenomenon, rather than merely a few sporadic, random instances of anti-Israelism, and that phenomenon comprises some specific elements that warrant closer examination. At the same time, the term anti-Israelism also clearly implies close links with other similar and related phenomena, namely, both anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. However, despite such similarities and links, anti-Israelism in its own right deserves a more precise analysis.

Let us begin with a few words about similarity. There are without doubt many parallels between anti-Semitism through the ages and the current anti-Israelism (or anti-Israeliness). For instance, hatred of Jews dates back to ancient times; but after the birth of Christianity, and especially the emergence of Pauline theology—that is, the push to split with Judaism and the transfer of legitimacy from the Old Testament to the New—the invalidation of Judaism became a key factor in Christian ideology. Over time anti-Judaism evolved into one of the fundamental building blocks of European cultural identity.

It is impossible to understand Europe without understanding the attitude toward Judaism, which has always been complex and multifaceted, as part of its culture. Even when it was based on the invalidation of Jewish principles—and that was not always the case—such invalidation did not necessarily, or even for the most part, include violence or exhortation to violence (not to mention genocide or annihilation). On the contrary, religious theological opposition to Judaism actually called for its defense, for a tolerant approach to religious differences and contrasts, and for safeguarding the existence of Jews. St. Augustine is one such important example, and there are many others.

THE SOURCES OF ANTI-SEMITISM

However, it was Christian theologians who provided the theological foundation and theoretical justification for the delegitimization of Judaism. One of the unique features of anti-Semitism throughout history—perhaps the most interesting of all—is the fact that it appears, grows, and develops as an elitist phenomenon, particularly predominant among the intelligentsia. This is one element that differentiates it from other phenomena of hatred and violence (toward foreigners or indeed anyone “different”). On various occasions Jews were victims of violence, whether more or less severe. But it is not especially that violence which is of special interest in anti-Semitism, nor does it constitute its defining element. On the other hand, the fact that so many of Europe’s leading intellectuals—great thinkers from all walks of life, writers, artists, philosophers, scientists, and others—have been anti-Semitic in one way or another is indeed a fascinating, particular, and important point of interest.

THE SOURCES OF ANTI-ISRAELISM

The present-day phenomenon of anti-Israelism also shares similar characteristics. Its principal, most eloquent, and determined proponents are likewise members of the intelligentsia, a fact that leads to an important conclusion: anti-Israelism is primarily a phenomenon denoting an identity, and mostly a cultural identity.

It is not only the traditionally anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist radical right and radical left that are currently at the forefront of anti-Israelism; some prominent members of the European and American intelligentsia are equally anti-Israeli. Such people usually—not always, but usually—do not call for any acts of violence against Israel, Israelis, or Jews. Instead, following the current popular trend, today’s anti-Israelism does have complex, usually implicit, rapports with terrorism and the direct incitement to violence that emanates mainly from Muslims and Arabs, but it does not take part itself in any direct call to violence—and certainly not to destruction. Even where the inherently Jewish nature of the state of Israel is negated, and even—here and there—where calls are heard for the state to cease to exist, on the face of it this does not refer to the physical destruction of its Jewish residents. That does not appear to be the topic.

Two aspects of similarity between historical anti-Judaism and current anti-Israelism, then, are the intellectual nature of the phenomenon on the one hand and its not-necessarily-violent inclination on the other. Thus anti-Israelism can indeed be seen as a continuation of traditional anti-Semitism or a phenomenon that falls within the more general category of “Judeophobia.”

But there are also perfectly good reasons to believe that there is a difference between the phenomena and to view anti-Israelism as a specific phenomenon in its own right. For instance, it is counterproductive, and usually more harmful than helpful, to characterize anti-Israeli positions and spokespeople as anti-Semitic. Every statement of that kind is immediately turned into a weapon in the attack on Israel and its supporters: anyone who calls his counterpart an anti-Semite is instantly perceived as McCarthyist or seeking to silence dissent.

THE PARTICIPATION OF JEWS AND ISRAELIS IN ANTI-ISRAELISM

Another facet, however, seems both considerably more serious and also quite unprecedented and utterly unique in history. Similar phenomena have been seen in other places and at other times, but not on such a scale. I am referring to Jews, former Israelis, and current Israelis jumping on the anti-Israeli bandwagon en masse. Indeed they are not only participating, but actually spearheading the movement, a fact that is of the utmost importance and that, both in and outside of Israel, does not receive enough emphasis.

It is hard to estimate the scope of this phenomenon, but it is certainly widespread enough to require attention. Even if, as it would appear, the numbers of Jewish and Israeli activists involved in anti-Israelism are not great, there is nevertheless a significant group of Israelis—some still resident in Israel at least part of the time, and others who have already gone to live elsewhere—who travel around the world speaking out against Israel. To a considerable extent they no longer address the Israeli public but a much wider one mostly on university campuses, but also outside the campus—in the UK, for example, in France or (increasingly) in Germany, in the United States and other places. Of course they receive a certain amount of support in Israel too, from an audience willing to listen to and accept what they say on home ground. However, they are apparently becoming increasingly marginal in Israeli society. On the other hand, they are gaining ground in various bids to delegitimize Israel in other forums—for instance, in what has become known as BDS (the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement) and by other means, more and less sophisticated.

One very significant development in this context is the reception that greets such Israelis abroad: they are accorded warmth and friendship and their message is welcomed. Naturally there are many explanations for such a phenomenon: it is a kind of alibi; it is expedient; the righteous, as is well known, are happy to have their work carried out for them by others. In any case, the role played by Israelis in anti-Israelism is an important one, and must be understood if we are to understand the phenomenon itself.

EUROPEAN LENIENCY TOWARD PALESTINIAN TERROR

Ultimately, however, the most important component of anti-Israelism is the inclination embedded deep in the European consciousness (and to a not insignificant degree the same applies in the United States) to accept even the most extreme and provocative anti-Israeli discourse as legitimate. Two examples may help clarify this point.

Following the massacre by Anders Breivik in Norway, the Norwegian ambassador to Israel made an interesting statement in which he differentiated between the event in his own country and Palestinian terror against Israelis.¹ The Palestinians, he said, “are doing this because of a defined goal that is related to the Israeli occupation,” whereas “in the case of the terror attack in Norway, the murderer had an ideology that says that Norway, particularly the Labor Party, is forgoing Norwegian culture.”

What is of interest here is not—or perhaps it is—especially the fact that a European ambassador to Israel allowed himself to make a statement that is without doubt both stupid and scandalous, but the fact that such a person—surely educated, articulate, and intelligent—could make that statement without being aware that it was morally outrageous.

The point is not even the content of what he said, but the fact that His Excellency the ambassador was not even aware that what he said was out of order, that his words may have created the impression of justifying Palestinian terrorism in some way, or at least that it had some valid political foundation.

In the second example, I was invited about a year ago to take part in a public discourse on the question of "What is Zionism?," which was due to be held at the *École normale supérieure*, one of France's most prestigious institutes of higher education. The initiative for the invitation came from several Jewish students at the *École* and followed on two or three highly successful appearances there (so I was told) by the Israeli academic Shlomo Sand, speaking to packed halls. Prof. Sand had come to talk about his book *The Invention of the Jewish People*, which was translated into French (among other languages) and greeted with much enthusiasm in France. I was told that it had sold over a hundred thousand copies there, which is very unusual for an academic book in France or anywhere else. In light of the contents of Sand's book, some students had thought it worthwhile to invite three other professors to talk on Zionism from a nonhostile point of view.

In contrast to the lively interest aroused by Prof. Sand, the discussion in which I took part was attended by very few people, no more than thirty or forty. Apparently some failed to come because of a rumor that disturbances were expected. And in fact there was some commotion in the hall. For almost three-quarters of an hour a small group of some five or six youngsters stood there shouting a variety of anti-Israeli slogans. This Greek chorus was more pathetic than threatening, but what was especially interesting was the audience reaction. Not a single person stood up to protest and no one left his seat; there simply was no reaction. Although the behavior was clearly in contravention of freedom of speech and freedom of expression, although *prima facie* it was neither unreasonable nor invalid to invite three professors, one Israeli and two French, to speak on the subject of "What is Zionism?," we were not allowed to speak until the protestors grew tired of shouting and eventually left the hall.

As I sat there on the podium looking out at the scene unfolding before me, I reflected to myself that we have already been here, that there is something paradigmatic in the public remaining silent, something paradigmatic in the remarks of the Norwegian ambassador, and something paradigmatic in the silence of these people, most of whom I imagine are not really anti-Israeli. Or at least not openly so.

Also present in that hall in Paris, of course, were cowardice, fear, spinelessness, and so many other characteristics already known to us from similar circumstances of greater and lesser importance. But there was something else too: the legitimization of the harshest and most extreme form of anti-Israeli dialogue. That pathetic bunch of young people shouting their anti-Israeli slogans were not exhorting the audience to kill Jews, or Israelis, and it is hard to imagine any of that little group going to the lengths of causing physical harm to Jews or Israelis. It is even possible that some of them may have been Jewish, but their "discourse" was something else entirely, and it was dangerous. It manifested a willingness to listen passively to a call that implied a justification of murder, destruction, and violence. It is that willingness that we call the "delegitimization of Israel."

DELEGITIMIZATION

One common element carried through from traditional anti-Semitism to present-day anti-Israelism, and shared by both, is that they turn delegitimization into a project. Delegitimization is in effect a technical term borrowed from the fields of law and politics. But in the present context of delegitimizing Israel, it takes on an entirely different meaning. The term delegitimization as applied in political or legal theory has a very defined function. It belongs almost exclusively to the space between the ruler and the ruled, or between, for example, government and citizens. What is popularly known as the “Arab Spring” spawned daily news items using phrases such as “Gaddafi loses his legitimacy,” “Assad’s regime has no legitimacy,” and so on. But no one talks of Syria itself being in some way illegitimate. The idea of legitimacy in modern political thought was born in or around the seventeenth century, with attempts to understand the basis on which a state could justify its demand for the obedience of citizens to government or rulers. It is here, and only here, that the use of the word legitimacy is appropriate. Legitimacy is a matter between state and people; it is not possible for the state itself to be “illegitimate.”

In more recent times, since World War II, a relatively new theoretical-legal dialogue has evolved. Legal categories have appeared, especially in the field of international law, which apply *prima facie* to states *per se*. But even here the question under debate is not the legitimacy of states *per se*, but the criminal or noncriminal manner in which those states conduct themselves. It is commonplace to say that there may be “rogue states.” More precisely, this refers to cases where the conduct of their leadership is criminal—the military, or those acting in the name of the state or with its backing, or where the state is willing to tolerate their actions. One question discussed within this context is whether—on either a theoretical or a practical level—the establishment of international institutions or the existence of international cooperation is justifiable for the purpose of legal clarity in such cases. Nowhere is the question of the legitimacy of the very existence of a state raised, even if that state is deemed “rebellious” and even if it pursues criminal activities.

The state of Israel exists by virtue of many things: the agreement of the international community, a United Nations resolution on partition, and the ensuing developments are well known. But talk of the delegitimization of the state of Israel or of Zionism does not refer to anything that can be defined in valid legal terms. This discourse of delegitimization really focuses on something else altogether: it legitimizes an eventual genocide.

The significance of what is known as “the delegitimization of Israel” comes very close to the term “license to kill.” The calm manner in which the anti-Israeli discourse seems to be received is what is often concealed behind the “innocent” façade of “legitimate criticism” of Israel and “its policies”; it precisely endorses the idea that the destruction of Israel is in fact conceivable. Even good people who do not consider it either necessary or permissible to kill Jews, even those who do not believe that the state of Israel should be obliterated—all are willing to come to terms with the fact that individuals appear on the stages of respected educational institutions, on campuses, in the press, or on television and talk in all seriousness about the dissolution of the state of Israel as a Jewish state. Ultimately, as in the case of anti-Semitism that did not take into account the destruction of Jews at all, the seeds of disaster—even as a mere possibility—are sown by a consensus of silence in the face of anti-Israeli dialogue.

A recent edition of the French journal *Cités* was devoted to a debate on “Zionism and Anti-Zionism.” Among the twenty or so articles it contained, representing a full range of positions—pro-Zionist, anti-Zionist, and neutral—was one contributed by two fairly well-known Israeli philosophers, a man and a woman, which ended with the simple, blunt, direct, and quite open statement that the time has finally come to end what they termed “the Zionist regime.”

Beyond the linguistic propriety and correctness and behind the theoretical posturing, this is a call for the dissolution of the state of Israel. The whole matter would not merit any serious attention were it not for one thing: the understanding at the very basis of this article that it is acceptable to make such statements in a civilized society. Indeed, in Israel and in other places too a whole subculture exists that of course rejects the idea that, for instance, Jews belong to an inferior race, or some similar notion. Yet, while this subculture has the means to express itself, those who speak seriously of the dissolution of the state of Israel are in no way denounced.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 “Envoy contrasts terror in Israel, Norway,” JTA, July 26, 2011, <http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/07/26/3088704/envoy-compares-terror-in-israel-norway>.