BUILDING AN INSTITUTIONAL FORTRESS AGAINST ANTI-SEMITISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH FIAMMA NIRENSTEIN

Fiamma Nirenstein completed her university studies in Florence in Modern History. On April 2008's national elections, she was elected Member of the Italian Parliament within Berlusconi's PDL coalition and she serves as Vice President of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies. Until her election, she was columnist and correspondent from Israel for "Il Giornale", a daily newspaper she still contributes to as analyst, as well as for "Panorama" weekly. From 1991 until December 2006, she worked as correspondent and columnist for "La Stampa" daily. She is an expert of the Middle East conflict, terrorism, anti-Semitism, and her activities deals with the great changes that are taking place within the Middle East democratization process. Fiamma has directed the Cultural Institute of the Italian Embassy in Tel Aviv in '93 and '94. She teaches Middle East History at Luiss University in Rome. She is a member of the board of the Italian Foundation *Magna Carta* and a fellow of the *Jerusalem Center for Public Affair* and of the *Hudson Institute*, Washington. She is one of the 6 members of the steering committee of the Interparliamentary Coalition on Combating Antisemitism (ICCA), inaugurated on February 2009 with the London Conference.

ABSTRACT

The delegitimization of Israel is based on the use of old anti-Semitic stereotypes, because when the Jews are delegitimized it means that they do not have the right to live, thus encouraging the genocidal attitudes towards them. The same thing takes place with Israel. The use of old stereotypes is certainly the basis of the new anti-Semitism. We need to build an institutional fortress in Parliament to fight anti-Semitism. This will send the most efficient message to the public: they will learn that our institutions are fighting anti-Semitism. This is setting a good example.

ON WHY SHE DECIDED TO SPEAK OUT ON ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism is the main illness affecting the West. Since the Shoa, since the Second World War, the very possibility of having valuable political discussions is affected by anti-Semitism. On a larger spectrum, anti-Semitism has come to serve as a model for other forms of racism in which attacks are being made on the basis of cultural, religious and/or human differences.

Of course, part of the motivation to speak out is as a Jewish person. It was always natural for me to think about, and deal with, anti-Semitism as it was part of my education, part of my way of life. This was the first struggle in which human beings, after the Shoa, had to fight for a world with human rights.

I became a member of Parliament a little less than 3 years ago right at the time that a huge wave of anti-Semitism had fallen onto Europe and I thought that it was time for me to begin fighting anti-Semitism on an institutional level. I immediately began insisting and campaigning for a parliamentary inquiry, an institutional bipartisan group devoted to examining the state of anti-Semitism in Italy. I was very encouraged by the ICCA conference in London, on February 2009, where I realized that there was a significant number of parliament members and personalities seeking to work in the same direction: this was an extremely motivating experience. The President of Parliament, Gianfranco Fini, kindly received my request to institute a parliamentary committee for the Inquiry into antisemitism and he also met on September 2009 the ICCA Steering Committee, which I am a member of. On January 27th 2010, the International Holocaust Remembrance day, we began our mandate with an hearing of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini. While we have collected a lot of data and new ideas, it's not enough. We want to elicit a legislative activity, to have a few laws enacted.

ON THE RECENT TRENDS IN THE EXPRESSION OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN EUROPE

In Italy we have several kinds of anti-Semitism, none of them as aggressive as in France or in Northern Europe. There is certainly hostility towards the Jews, but it is more subdued than in some other European countries. More

specifically, a recent survey shows that 44% of Italians do not have a positive or a friendly attitude towards Jews; 12% state openly that they are anti-Semites. The anti-Semitic acts we find in Italy are not so much physical aggressions but expressed as graffiti, mostly of swastikas, in cemeteries and on school buildings. While in 2008 65 acts were reported which were related to anti-Semitism, the number dropped to 53 acts in 2009. By far, the worst anti-Semitic activity is found online. I have been an object of these types of anti-Semitic activities. There are caricatures of me where they have dressed me as Hitler, or wearing both the Star of David and the swastikas. So I myself have been an object of anti-Semitic expression and since 2001, I have had to be accompanied by 2 bodyguards at all times. As a journalist and a correspondent, and since the beginning of the intifada, my writings about the Middle Eastern conflict have put me in the spotlight for Islamic groups and fascist groups, who think that I am too "Jewish" for their taste. There are indeed groups that are solely animated by their negative feelings about the Jews.

There are different streams of anti-Semitism in Italy. First, we have old fascists who are accompanied by a younger generation of extremists from the right and give expression to their Jew hatred. The most important phenomenon in Italy is an old-fashioned fascism. Fascism was a big part of Italy in the past, and we can still find a resurgence of this fascist phenomenon. A short while ago, a senator, an old fascist, directed a comment to a political group that he disliked in the senate, asking if the group had already ordered kippas, branding them as traitors. He wanted to insult the group he disliked by associating them with the Jews. A second source of anti-Semitism comes from the Muslim side, which can be terribly both anti-Israelist and anti-Semitic.While we do have radical Islamists in Italy, the phenomenon is not as strong as it is in France or in Northern Europe.

There is also a third stream of anti-Semitism to be found on the Left, the radical left more than the moderate left. The radical left in Italy is fairly strong and this strand of anti-Semitism is closely intertwined with anti-Israelism. On the websites of these Leftist anti-Semites, we can denote a terrible confusion between such concepts as right, left, Israel, Israelism: they are all mixed together into a soup of anti-Semitism which is directed towards the weak minds. This "mixing" is very dangerous because it becomes quite easy to say that Israelis kill children because the Jews like to kill children; these lies are thus pushed into wide circulation. Of course, they also harbour conspiracy theories about Israel and the United States seeking to dominate the world.

We can also consider the groups who hate Jews and mostly pretend to be critics of Israel. However, in the way they present their argument, they demonstrate that they are animated by strong anti-Jewish feelings. A famous sociologist, Renato Mannheimer, whom we listened during one of the hearings in front of the inquiry committee, said that the moment when you are certain that an anti-Israeli attitude becomes an anti-Semitic attitude is when it ends up attacking the Jews.

ON THE NEW ANTI-SEMITISM

Today's anti-Semitism is genocidal. People who publicly say that they wish to kill the Jews are rapidly increasing in numbers on a global level, mostly coming from the side of radical Islamism with roots mainly in Iran on the one side and the Muslim brotherhood on the other. Iran is dangerous. It supports Hamas and Hezbollah in significant ways, all these groups who declare that they wish to kill all the Jews, not just Israelis. They have this wish written in their charters and they declare it openly without shame on television all the time. All over Europe, there are television and media waves and internet sites that diffuse this message: "Kill the Jews". And sometimes, this wish becomes reality, for example in France with the assassination of (Ilan) Halimi, one of the most terrible episodes. He was kidnapped and killed, but was kept in a place where people heard him shouting but nobody moved a finger to try to help him. This incident underscores the need to deal with aggressive anti-Semitism, but also with the passivity of people in general. We have to make people aware all the time. We have organized a large number of public demonstrations and events, something we do day after day, and we never forget to put the emphasis on anti-Semitism.

The delegitimization of Israel is based on the use of old anti-Semitic stereotypes, because when the Jews are delegitimized it means that they do not have the right to live, thus encouraging the genocidal attitudes towards them. The same thing takes place with Israel.

The use of old stereotypes is certainly the basis of the new anti-Semitism. A Swedish newspaper, the Aftonbladet, wrote that Israeli soldiers abducted and killed young Palestinian to harvest their organs. This lie was repeated everywhere and rapidly became an international scandal. The Swedish government refused to react since it didn't want to hurt "freedom of speech and of press". This example depicts Jews in a blood libel, as wanting to take the blood of their enemy. And it also depicts the Jews selling organs because they like money and they are greedy.

There was also the story of Israeli soldiers attacking a group of pacifist Palestinian on board the Mavi Marmara, a story which showed yet again the Jews in a negative light. Soon after the event, people found out that this group was in fact associated with IHH, an organisation linked to terrorism. It was also discovered that the individuals in this groups had declared that they would go to Israel to become martyrs for Allah. But with the anti-Semitic attitude of the media and public opinion, Jews were immediately depicted as Israelis who just wanted to kill. This is a measure of delegitimization. The Jews have been delegitimized in the public opinion, just like they were with the Nazis, just like they were with the fascists.

ON THE BEST TACTICS IN DEFEATING THE SCOURGE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Public demonstrations to raise awareness have to be tied to a continuous flow of information and education. Professor Dina Porat, Head of the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism of Tel Aviv University, is coming on October 18 to present a book on anti-Semitism and Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, will be speaking at the Italian Parliament. Both of them will testify as experts in front of the Inquiry Committee.

You can do regular activities but you must also systematically make your point and repeat it. We are fortunate because we have institutional help either from our Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who is very sensitive to this issue, and from the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini, who gives us the means and the possibility of organizing this parliamentary committee. We need to build an institutional fortress in Parliament to fight anti-Semitism. This will send the most efficient message to the public: they will learn that our institutions are fighting anti-Semitism. This is setting a good example.

Along with our continuous awareness work, our parliamentary hearings have done much to help us understand anti-Semitism. People like Irwin Cotler and Elie Wiesel came to speak and we created an international meeting point.

ON THE ICCA AS A VALUABLE TOOL IN FIGHTING ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE ROLE MPs CAN PLAY

MPs can contribute greatly in building the institutional fortress. The institutions have to set a continuous example of being able to change and to renew themselves. Our President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, more than once declared that often what is presented as criticism of Israel is actually anti-Semitism. The President of the Republic, who comes from the Left, shows that we have something here that can really change the minds of people. We have a responsibility to tell people what is going on. If there is a need to modify the definition of anti-Semitism, we modify it. If there is a genocidal attitude, we denounce it. If the web poses an international problem, we try to find an international agreement. This is why it is useful for us to get together and exchange about problems which have now become global.

The ICCA provides a strong framework where we can attack the new forms of anti-Semitism.