THE DELEGITIMIZATION OF ISRAEL: CLASSIC ANTI-SEMITISM IN NEW CLOTHES

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ABSTRACT

The speed and deepening of anti-Semitic discourse in Europe now is becoming a phenomenon that challenges the post-war democratic settlement. It is now commonplace to report attacks on Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and Jews themselves who wear some mark of their religion as they go to school or walk to prayer on the Shabbath. Under the guise of islamophobia the European right is now creating a new ideology of dislike for the other in which remarks about Jews, the Jewish lobby, and opposition to Israel's right to exist can all be expressed.

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There is a concerted and coherent effort to delegitimise Israel and present the Jewish citizens of Israel as alien beings in their own homeland. The slogan of the 1930s "Kauft nicht bei Juden" (Don't buy from Jews) has now been taken up by a great number of liberal-left institutions including the British trade union movement.

The attempts to impose boycotts on Israel paradoxically focus in areas like contacts with universities or with journalists or with intellectuals – the three areas of contestation in Israel against the policy of continued occupation of Palestinian lands.

None of the university professors, newspaper commentators, left campaigners and others would ever dream of applying the same standards to any of Israel's neighbours. There are no calls to boycott anything made or exported from Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States despite the appalling treatment of foreign labour in those countries. Turkey has illegally occupied northern Cyprus and sent thousands of settlers there in defiance of UN resolutions. There is no protest campaign against Turkey or demand that Turkish goods or universities be boycotted. Iran hangs teenage gays and authorizes the stoning to death of women who flout ultra Sharia codes. No-one demands that Iranians inside or outside Iran have to bear the collective guilt for the decisions of their government that is now imposed on Jews in Israel and in Jewish communities worldwide.

Nobody in Britain would dream of expecting every Iranian to renounce his nation and his identity because of the bad behaviour by its leaders. But there is a presumption that if British Jews do not reject Israel then somehow they are complicit in those actions by Israeli authorities that many find offensive.

David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, went to Turkey and pleased his Turkish hosts by referring to Gaza as "a prison camp." He did not mention that Egypt also was involved in blockading Gaza and closing its frontiers to trade. He did not mention that Israelis had handed Gaza over to the Gazans and been confronted with a hail of rockets pouring down upon southern Israel. He did not mention that the Turkish Prime Minister and the Turkish state adopted far more ferocious measures against the Kurdish PKK than Israel does against Hamas.

This one-sided analysis of events in the Middle East by no less authority than the British Prime Minister

encourages the continuing delegitimisation of the right of the Jewish people in Israel to live without the fear and menace of terrorism or exterminationist ideology.

Politically the growth of overt and covert anti-Semitic politics is now a worrying feature of European discourse. The hard right, the anti-Zionist left, and militant Islamist ideologues combine to use old images of the secret Jewish wielders of influence under the rubric of the "Israel Lobby". Despite clear evidence that Jerusalem has been always a cradle city of Judaism it is routinely described as an Arab and Muslim city. Esoteric historians publish well-reviewed books that argue there are no Jewish people as such. Books on antisemitism may be well received and reviewed but rarely get display space in bookstores.

The European Parliament now has MPs who come from anti-Semitic political formations. Even if extreme right-wing parties prefer to profile their hostility to Islam than their earlier anti-Jewish ideology their background beliefs remain unchanged. Some parties like Jobbik, which won 16% of the vote in the recent Hungarian parliamentary elections, are openly anti-Jewish.

The new revisionism also involves the European right as it tries to make an absolute equivalence between the Shoah and the crimes of Communism. Stalin certainly presided over mass deportations, famines, and extermination of groups of class enemies like the Polish officers and intellectuals liquidated at Katyn. But nothing undertaken by Stalin compares to the extraordinary scientific, engineering, technical, logistical and organisational effort by the German Nazis in a relatively short period between 1941 and early 1945 to gather millions of Jews from every corner of Europe and send them to be put to death using what at the time were the most advanced technological means.

This right-wing effort to banalise the Holocaust and to relativise it is designed precisely to reduce the centrality of both the Jewish genocide of the mid-20th century and thus lessen the legitimacy of Israel as the one nation on earth where Jews would not again feel persecuted.

It was possible to make one's peace with Stalinism by becoming a Communist even if arrests, executions and deportations were often the lot of dedicated Bolsheviks as well as anti-Stalinist leftists. But it was impossible for a Jew to escape fascist exterminationism by claiming some other religion or ethnicity.

This seeping into public discourse of anti-Semitic tropes could be seen by the remarks by European Commissioner, Karel De Gucht who said, "It is not easy to have a rational discussion with a moderate Jew" on the subject of the Middle East. Mr De Gucht, a Belgium conservative, is Commissioner for Trade. It is very worrying that the man responsible for European Union trade where one of the chief goals of the powerful and pervasive anti-Israeli lobby in Europe is indeed to sever trade ties between Israel and the European Union.

Mr De Gucht later apologised for his remarks but the fact that he held these thoughts not that they surfaced shows how at a sub-conscious level the contempt for Jews is now permeating much of the European political class. Further evidence of this came in the book by Thilo Sarrazin, a prominent German social democrat and a member of the Bundesbank governing council. His book was part of the increasing number of diatribes against Muslim presence in Europe. The language and metaphors of this "Eurabia" literature (often written by Americans or metropolitan conservatives with little daily contact with the variable and moderate reality of European Muslim existence) is used to stigmatise Muslims in Europe. At times the language is almost word for word a repetition of language used before 1940 against the presence of too many Jews in parts of Europe. The metaphor of a nation within a nation, owing external loyalties, creating their own networks, not living by the culture and norms of the nativist national identity now used by the proponents of the so-called Eurabia thesis is little different from that of classical French and German anti-Semitic ideologue. In the case of Mr Sarrazin he said that Jews had a "particular gene". So once again we refer to Jewish racial separate identity as an object of political discourse. This filthy reversion to the worst of German past discussions on Jews provoked an immediate reaction from the Social Democratic Party and obliged Mr Sarrazin to leave the Bundesbank board. No such sanction was applied to the European Union Trade Commissioner De Gucht.

Under the guise of Islamophobia the European right is now creating a new ideology of dislike for the other in which remarks about Jews, the Jewish lobby, and opposition to Israel's right to exist can all be expressed.

This combined with the liberal left's hostility to Israel's need to defend herself against terrorist attacks and the right of the Jewish people in Israel to live at peace and behind secure frontiers is further fuelling the rise of a new anti-Semitism in Europe. The left has invented the concept of Israel as an "apartheid" state. This despite the presence of Arab members of the Knesset and the existence of Arab communities and culture with pre-1967 Israel. That there is discrimination, often harsh and brutal, against Arabs on the West Bank is self-evident. But apartheid was based on a fundamental inhuman racism that denied the humanity of South African on grounds of colour, not political behaviour. By definition no apartheid state can stay a member of the UN or be accepted as part of the international community. By deliberately using the metaphor of "apartheid state", anti-Jewish activists are seeking to dehumanize Israel and remove it from the community of nations.

Yet liberal university campuses routinely have days or weeks of Orwellian hate against Israel as an "apartheid" state which must be shunned and treated as an open target for political abolition. Just as anyone who might

have supported the racism of apartheid South Africa faced opposition and criticism, the support, strong or weak, of Jews in European countries for Israel, or the perfectly natural affinity that Jews have with Israel just as British Pakistanis or Indians have an affection for the country they feel connected to, is held up for ridicule and shame. After all what decent democratic human being can feel warmth for an apartheid state. To do so is to be less than a human. Once again Jews who do not condemn Israel are told they are not fully human. It is classic antisemitism in new clothes.