RESURGENT ANTISEMITISM AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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ABSTRACT

The onset of what many now call the "new antisemitism" dates back at least to the year 2000. The collapse of the Camp David peace talks in that year followed shortly thereafter by the violence of the second intifada helped to create a belligerently hostile mood against Israel and Jews in general. Despite the huge scandal of the Holocaust, which most people probably thought would prevent antisemitism from appearing again in the public domain, the genie is once more out of the bottle. Is there a new antisemitism today? There is, and while much of it resembles the antisemitisms of the past, certain features of present-day hostility to Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish state do seem new.

After a period of relative dormancy, antisemitism has become resurgent in our day. According to the just-released *Year in Review 2008/09* report of The Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, the year 2009 began with "a wave of antisemitic manifestations [that] swept the world," with close to 1000 incidents reported in January alone. The perpetrators of these aggressive actions target synagogues, Jewish schools, cemeteries, monuments, and individuals. In Great Britain and parts of Europe, such attacks have become virulent over the past decade. Denis MacShane, a British Labour Party MP, has written that "hatred of Jews has reached new heights in Europe and many points south and east of the old continent." He continues:

> *"Synagogues attacked. Jewish schoolboys jostled on public transportation. Rabbis punched and knifed. British Jews feeling compelled to raise millions to provide private security for their weddings and community events. On campuses, militant anti-Jewish students fueled by Islamist or far-left hate seeking to prevent Jewish students from expressing their opinions."* [1]

In response to this upsurge in violence, then Prime Minister Tony Blair commissioned Mr. MacShane and others to investigate new outbreaks of antisemitism in the United Kingdom. Their report is sobering. In a parallel move, the U.S. Congress passed the Global Anti-Semitism Review Act of 2004, which requires the U.S. Department

of State to document acts of Antisemitism globally. The annual reports issued by the State Department confirm the rise of antisemitic hostility throughout much of the world. Similar reports issued by monitoring agencies in Europe confirm these troublesome findings.

The onset of what many now call the "new antisemitism" dates back at least to the year 2000. The collapse of the Camp David peace talks in that year followed shortly thereafter by the violence of the second intifada helped to create a belligerently hostile mood against Israel and Jews in general. So did the terror strikes against New York and Washington, D.C. on 9/11/01, for which Jews were absurdly blamed. And when in March, 2003, America decided to go to war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Jews were once again held accountable, this time because some of President Bush's advisers had names like Perle, Wolfowitz, and Abrams. The recent fighting between Israel and Hamas in January 2009 exacerbated an already ugly and aggressive mood, as has the current global financial crisis, for which a disturbingly large number of people hold Jews responsible. Taken together, these developments provide the backdrop to much of today's anti-Jewish activities, even if they do not fully explain them.

Before examining some of the features of the "new anti-Semitism," it is important to note some of its effects. According to a survey of attitudes toward Jews in seven European countries (Austria, France, Hungary, Poland, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom), released in January, 2009, by the Anti-Defamation League, many of the older antisemitic canards still resonate in Europe. Among the highlights:

- 31 percent of European respondents blame Jews in the financial industry for the global financial meltdown.
- 40 percent of all respondents believe "Jews have too much power in the business world."
- 41 percent of Europeans think "Jews have too much power in international financial markets." In Spain the figure is 74%.
- 44 percent think Jews talk too much about the Holocaust.
- 23% of those surveyed continue to blame Jews for the death of Jesus.[2] Other surveys carried out over the last several years show similarly disturbing results. And polls conducted in Muslim, and especially Arab, countries indicate attitudes towards Jews that are much worse.

Despite the huge scandal of the Holocaust, which most people probably thought would prevent antisemitism from appearing again in the public domain, the genie is once more out of the bottle. Is there a new antisemitism today? There is, and while much of it resembles the antisemitisms of the past, certain features of present-day hostility to Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish state do seem new.

One is that, like so much else today, Jew-hatred has been globalized and leaps effortlessly across borders. In the past, antagonism to Jews tended to take the form of localized activities, but thanks to the Internet and other global media, antisemitism now belongs to the world at large. With the press of a computer key, it can be accessed and distributed in a flash.

Two, while often drawing on the same repertoire of fabricated claims against the Jews as in the past – that they are clannish, conspiratorial, money-hungry, manipulative, predatory, treacherous, etc. – antisemitism is protean and evolves. It may, for instance, promote images of Jews as poisoners, but instead of contaminating wells, as they were said to do in the medieval period, or blood, as in the Nazi period, this time Jews may be accused of contaminating the atmosphere itself or targeting DNA.

Three, some of the most virulent sources of today's antisemitism are located within the Muslim world, not, as in the past, within Christendom. While some of this negative passion is attributed to Muslim anger toward Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians, much of it predates the violence brought on by the recent intifadas and the Gaza war and has roots within Arab Muslim culture. To understand Muslim antisemitism today, one has to see it as part of a crisis within Islam itself, as well as part of its deep-seated grievances against the West.

Four, a significant strain of contemporary antisemitism either denies the Holocaust outright, claiming it never happened, or diminishes the extent of its destructiveness, claiming the Jews exaggerate the numbers of the dead to win the world's sympathy and thereby gain political advantage for Israel; at the same time, it has become common for the words and images of the Holocaust to be appropriated for use against the Jews, branding them as the new Nazis and accusing Israel of conducting a campaign of genocide against the Palestinians. Thus, Holocaust denial, which is widespread in many Muslim countries, goes hand in hand with genocidal fantasies of bringing on a new, or second, Holocaust.

Five, and in line with what was just said, some of the most impassioned charges levelled against the Jews involve vicious accusations against the Jewish state. Anti-Zionism, in fact, is the form that much of today's antisemitism takes, so much so that some now see earlier attempts to rid the world of Jews finding a parallel in present-day desires to get rid of the Jewish state.

What is one to make of such attitudes? One can object to specific Israeli policies and actions without being a Jew-hater. But to call into question the Jewish state's legitimacy and right to continued existence; to vilify it as a racist state akin to apartheid South Africa and condemn it for allegedly carrying out systematic programs of ethnic cleansing; to target it for boycotts, divestment campaigns, and other forms of punishment that would make of Israel an outlaw, or pariah, nation; and to associate it with the murderous symbols and genocidal aims of Nazi Germany – to do any

or all of these things is to move well beyond what is often called "criticism of Israel." For what are these attempts to demonize and delegitimize Israel – and they have been growing in volume and intensity – if not the no-longer hidden expressions of a wish to see the end of the Jewish state?

And not just the Jewish state, for the distance has been narrowing between denunciations of Israel and excoriations of the Jews as such. On some of the placards and chants on display in street demonstrations at the time of the Gaza war, the terms "Israel" and "Jew" frequently became interchangeable. One heard and saw not just "Israel Out of Gaza" but "Back to the Ovens" and "Jews to the gas." As one astute commentator observed, "the anti-Semitic incitement in the anti-Israel demonstrations [is growing] wider... When someone carries a slogan saying "kill the Jews," he expresses an expectation that someone will do it." [3] The fantasy life of today's antisemites, in other words, has become overly excited and is no longer held in check by the taboos formerly in place against openly expressing Jew-hatred. That is now increasingly the case in the West and even more so in Muslim countries. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbullah, probably spoke for many when, in 2002, he declared:

> *"If we searched the entire world for a person more cowardly, despicable, weak and feeble in psyche, mind, ideology and religion, we would not find anyone like the Jew. Notice, I do not say the Israeli."*[4]

Left unchecked, these developments are certain to bring on substantial harm, and not only to the Jews. As Denis MacShane puts it, openly expressed Jew-hatred targets not only Jews and Israel:

> *"It is about everything democrats have fought for: the truth without fear, no matter one's religion or political beliefs. The new anti-Semitism threatens all of humanity."*[5]

This fact was recognized at a major gathering of parliamentarians held in London on February 17-18, 2009). The findings and resolutions that emerged from the London Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism provide us with some grounds for hope. Among other things, the "London Declaration, which was signed by 125 parliamentarians from 40 countries, called on national governments, parliaments, international institutions, political and civic leaders and civil society to "affirm democratic and human values, build societies based on respect and citizenship and combat any manifestations of anti-Semitism and discrimination." It made the promise that the parliamentarians affirm their commitment to a comprehensive program of action to meet this challenge. "We are alarmed at the resurrection of the old language of prejudice and its modern manifestations – in rhetoric and political action – against Jews, Jewish belief and practice and the State of Israel," the statement said... The declaration made reference in particular to Venezuela and Iran, stating: "We are alarmed by government-backed anti-Semitism in general and state-backed genocidal anti-Semitism, in particular." Signatories also pledged to expose, challenge, and isolate those who engage in hate against Jews and target the State of Israel as a Jewish collective."

Of course, everything will depend on what measures will be taken to implement the will to combat antisemitism expressed so strongly at the London conference. We shall see what the follow-up will be like. But at least for now, we can take heart from the fact that so many "parliamentarians called on their respective governments and the UN to "never again allow the institutions of the international community to be abused for the purposes of trying to establish any legitimacy for anti-Semitism." [6]

Jason Kenney, a member of the Canadian parliament, spoke eloquently at the London Conference, quoting his own Prime Minister Stephen Harper:

> *"Unfortunately in some countries, hatred of the Jews is still preached from religious pulpits and still proclaimed from political podiums. There are still people who would perpetrate another Holocaust if they could."... "It's not good enough for politicians to...say they remember and mourn what happened over six decades ago. They must stand up to those who advocate the destruction of Israel and its people today. And they must be unequivocal in their condemnation of antisemitic despots, terrorists and fanatics....Most people in most civilized countries recognize antisemitism for what it is, a pernicious evil that must be exposed, confronted and repudiated whenever and where ever it appears, an evil so profound that it is ultimately a threat to us all."*[7]

These are precisely the kinds of words that need to be heard today. Taken to heart by enough people, they will help us overcome the hateful words and deeds of hostile people, who, if unopposed, would do serious harm to the social harmony that every decent person values and wants to sustain.

NOTES

[1] Denis MacShane, "The New Antisemitism," The Washington Post (September 4, 2007).

[2] "ADL poll: 31% of Europeans blame Jews for global financial crisis," Haaretz (February 10, 2009).

[3] Eldad Beck, "Tension in Europe," The Jerusalem Report (February 2, 2009).

[4] The New Yorker (Oct. 14, 2002).

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] "Declaration to fight anti-Semitism signed in London," The Jerusalem Post (February 18, 2009).

[7] "Canada and Canadians stand proud," (February 20, 2009); http://www.israpundit.com/2008/?p=9736#more-9736.