



The Persistence of European Anti-Semitism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The fight against anti-Semitism on the international level continues to be characterized by restraint combined with ignorance – a potentially deadly combination. European hand-wringing and the spouting of clichés will never suffice; the extent of the rot must be acknowledged if it is to be effectively confronted.

Almost every day in Europe there is a statement, a workshop, or a symposium on anti-Semitism. An international conference on the problem recently took place in Vienna, for example, under the auspices of Austrian PM Sebastian Kurz. Do such activities have any effect on European anti-Semitism, which grows by the day? Do they create any obstacle to the enormous diffusion and radicalization of online anti-Semitism – Jew-hatred 2.0?

Judging from the past ten years, little will change. Eloquent speeches are given, appeals are published, clichés are uttered about confronting Jew-hatred with a “resolute fight” and “with all the severity of the law” – and after some head-shaking and hand-wringing, everybody returns to business as usual.

For years, the main problem of the diverse European authorities responsible for the fight against anti-Semitism has been that they reside in a culture of clichés. True, there is a greater awareness of the need to confront the spread of Jew-hatred. But to do so, it is essential to act knowledgeably and avoid double standards.

Researchers have been warning for years about the expansion, radicalization, and increasing normalization of Jew-hatred. This is occurring throughout European society and is especially worrying in terms of its focus on Israel. All the stereotypes of classical Judeophobia are projected onto the Jewish state. Its Jewish population is demonized and its right to exist contested. Little is done to reject this newly dominant pattern, and Israel-related hate is becoming a politically correct form of anti-Semitism.

Although this Israel-directed form of Judeophobia is exacerbated by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it is rooted, as has been shown empirically by recent research, in the age-old hostility against Jews and Judaism. Consequently, the struggle against anti-Semitism must keep its focus on the origin of the phenomenon: the darker side of the roots of European culture in which the confrontation between Judaism and earlier Christianity laid the foundations of Western Judeophobia.

The present-day struggle against anti-Semitism is not an easy task. It is painful, and indeed must be painful, if European society is to grasp the full significance of the phenomenon and the dangers it contains.

Today's public debates on anti-Semitism are frequently dominated by people who, while eager to express their personal opinions, are clearly ill-informed about the long history and chameleon-like character of Judeophobia. They are blissfully ignorant of the way Jew-hatred over the centuries has kept the same semantics but modified its forms and expressions according to changing circumstances.

Consequently, we hear passionate affirmations, long since rejected by empirical research, that "rightist populism is responsible for contemporary anti-Semitism," or that "the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the main cause," or that "classical Jew-hatred is in retreat." Completely misleading, too, is the assertion that "anti-Semitism and Muslim-hatred are closely related," or that present-day Muslims suffer the same discrimination Jews once did.

A misleading, albeit common allegation is that not enough research has yet been conducted on the problem of anti-Semitism. In this way, the copious results of existing research on the subject are swept under the rug and the real struggle against Jew-hatred is pushed into the future. Also, in recent times we hear and read frequently that "anti-Semitism has reached the middle of society." "Reached"? Jew-hatred always came from the educated social center. There sit its most representative perpetrators. It has never been otherwise.

As in the past, present-day anti-Semitism reproduces and multiplies Jew-hating tendencies deeply rooted in Western consciousness. It follows the age-old pattern that attributes to the Jews all the miseries of the world. Anti-Semitic rancor is always directed against Jewish existence *per se* – and today, this means the most vital symbol of Jewish existence, the State of Israel. The opposition to Israel is now the meeting point of Jew-haters of diverse political and ideological colors, the common ground of present-day anti-Semitism. The old Judeophobia is projected onto the Jewish state.

Here lies the critical point where European official policy should intervene. Tirades of hate against the Jewish state are found not on the margins but in the center of Western society. Rancor against Israel feeds the dissemination of present-day anti-Semitism more than any other factor.

Consider the common cliché, long ago debunked as fiction and yet still repeated like a mantra: “Every critique of Israeli policy is equated with anti-Semitism.” This is an absurdity. There are clear criteria in the research on anti-Semitism distinguishing between “critique of Israel” and “Israel-directed Jew-hatred.” There are no grey zones in anti-Semitism.

Nevertheless, the anti-Semitic yardstick referring to the condemnation of Israel is still not clearly perceived as a new pattern of Jew-hatred. This must happen if Europeans are to confront the continent’s increasing level of Judeophobia. Anyone who denies the anti-Semitism of hashtags like #DeathToIsrael or calls to boycott the Jewish state is blind.

When political spokespeople (rightly) criticize the new German right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland because of its refusal to confront the frequent anti-Semitic utterances of its supporters, but at the same time overlook (or even applaud) when Mahmoud Abbas spouts well-known Judeophobic stereotypes in the Parliament of the EU; or when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rages against Israel with surreal accusations; or when Jeremy Corbyn defames the Jewish state as an unjust colonial creation – then these officials have a serious credibility problem. It is not enough to criticize low-level neo-Nazis, Islamists, or BDS activists. Anyone who seriously wants to address the problem should look to the stage of international politics and step in forcefully.

Anyone who shrugs off anti-Semitic raging has not yet grasped that hate speech is a form of mental violence that contains the potential for physical violence. In the end, mental arson turns into physical arson.

The fight against anti-Semitism on the international level continues to be characterized by restraint combined with ignorance. Both are deadly – first for Jews, later for democracy.

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