



PERSPECTIVES

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Tens of Millions of Europeans Have Demonic Views of Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Tens of millions of European citizens have a demonic view of Israel. This manifests itself in a variety of ways, the most serious of which is comparing Israel's actions against the Palestinians to those of the Nazis against the Jews. The demonization of Israel leads to antisemitic insults directed against Jews in general. The EU and its member states, but also the Israeli government, have been greatly negligent in dealing with this problem.

Thanks to an increasing number of quantitative studies, a picture of the vast extent of European demonization of Israel is finally beginning to emerge. One of the most detailed of such studies is a recent report commissioned by the Hungarian Action and Protection League and prepared by the Hungarian pollster company Inspira Ltd.

Inspira interviewed representative samples of the adult population between the ages of 18 and 75 by gender, age group, settlement size, and education in 16 European countries. Twenty-five percent of the interviewees disagree that Israel acts in legitimate self-defense against its enemies. Twenty-seven percent disagree that Israel is the only democratic country in the Middle East. When 25% think of Israel's politics, they feel they understand why some people hate Jews. Twenty-four percent think Israeli policy toward the Palestinians justifies an international boycott of Israel. The same percentage think Israelis behave like Nazis towards the Palestinians.

In today's Western societies, the phrase "behaving like Nazis" is used to convey absolute evil, because it means either wanting to or actually attempting to commit genocide. Those familiar with the history of antisemitism recognize the ancient antisemitic hate motif in the usage of this

phrase to vilify Jews. It is a motif that has played a crucial role in the persecution of Jews throughout history: the idea that the Jew personifies absolute evil.

In Christian antisemitism, that hate motif was expressed as the false claim that all Jews in all generations are responsible for the execution of God's purported son, Jesus. National/ethnic antisemitism reached its lowest point with Nazism. In Nazi Germany, the absolute evil motif mutated into the promotion of the hate concept that Jews are subhuman and should be exterminated.

In today's world, Israel and Jews are tarred with a new mutation of the absolute evil idea: that Israel, the Jewish state, is a Nazi regime that intends to wipe out the Palestinians. The Inspira poll provided new data on this to supplement earlier studies. While the numbers vary substantially among studies, they all translate into many tens of millions of Europeans who believe Israel fits this contemporary definition of absolute evil.

Prior to Inspira, the main representative study was published in 2011 by the University of Bielefeld on behalf of the German Social Democratic Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Its research was undertaken in seven European countries. The interviewers polled 1,000 people per country over the age of 16 in the fall of 2008. One question was whether they agreed with the assertion that Israel is carrying out a war of extermination against the Palestinians. The lowest percentages of those who agreed were in Italy and the Netherlands, with 38% and 39%, respectively. Other figures were: Hungary 41%, Britain 42%, Germany 48%, and Portugal 49%. In Poland, the figure was a staggering 63%.

In 2004, the University of Bielefeld undertook a similar study covering only Germany. More than 2,500 German adults were asked whether they agreed with the statement: "What the state of Israel does today to the Palestinians is in principle not different from what the Nazis did to the Jews in the Third Reich." Fifty-one percent of the interviewees answered in the affirmative. Sixty-eight percent agreed with the statement that "Israel undertakes a war of destruction against the Palestinians."

The study concluded that criticism of Israel functions to a certain extent as cover for antisemitic attitudes and opinions. In their definition of antisemitism, the study group of the University of Bielefeld stated that it was antisemitic to compare "Israel's policy toward the Palestinians and the persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich." "Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis" is one of the examples of contemporary antisemitism in the widely accepted International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of this hatred.

According to this definition, the majority of Germans polled at that time held extreme antisemitic views. Thirty-five percent fully agreed and 33% were inclined to agree that Israel is working to destroy the Palestinians. Twenty-seven percent fully agreed and 24% were inclined to agree that Israel's conduct toward the Palestinians is essentially the same as the Nazis' toward the Jews. Only 19% totally disagreed and 30% were inclined to disagree. The findings of this survey, published in 2004, reinforced findings of earlier surveys on German antisemitism.

An Italian poll conducted by Paola Merulla in the fall of 2003 found that 17% of Italians said it would be better if Israel did not exist. A study published in 2007 in Switzerland by gfs.bern found that 50% of the Swiss population see Israel as "the Goliath in the extermination war of the Palestinians." In 2012, in a study carried out by the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities in Norway, a sample group of people was asked, "Is what Israel does to the Palestinians identical to what the Nazis did to the Jews?" Thirty-eight percent gave an affirmative answer.

A poll conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2013 found 41% agreement among the German population with the statement that Israel behaves like Nazis when it comes to the treatment of Palestinians. In 2007, the figure was 30%. The 2013 figure translates into more than 25 million German adults who believe that Israel is absolute evil.

There does appear to be evidence of some improvement in attitudes, though the percentages are still alarming. In September 2014, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Bielefeld University carried out another study in Germany. They again asked whether people agreed with the statement, "Israel conducts a war of extermination against the Palestinians." Forty percent of Germans polled agreed. As noted above, the figure agreeing with this statement in 2004 was 68%. The statement was also phrased in another way: "What the state of Israel does today to the Palestinians is in principle no different from what the Nazis did to the Jews during the Third Reich." In 2014, 27% answered affirmatively, compared to 51% in 2004.

A British study in 2017 found that 23% of the British population thinks Israel is deliberately trying to wipe out the Palestinian people. Twenty-four percent thought Israel is committing mass murder in Palestine. Twenty-one percent considered Israel an apartheid state. Eighteen percent thought the interests of Israelis are at odds with the interests of the rest of the world. Ten percent thought Israel is the cause of all the troubles in the Middle East and 9% thought people should boycott Israeli goods and products. The study also found that anti-Israel attitudes among Muslims in the UK are at a higher level than those of the general population.

In 2003, a Eurobarometer study asked whether a variety of countries were a threat to world peace. Fifty-nine percent of Europeans said Israel posed such a threat. No other country on the list was considered a similar threat by such a high percentage. Iran and North Korea tied for second place at 53%. At the bottom of the list was the EU, which only 8% of Europeans saw as a danger to world peace. Among the then fifteen EU countries, the state with the highest percentage viewing Israel as a threat to world peace was the Netherlands at 74%. Next in line were the Austrians with 69%. In hindsight, we understand that these perceptions reflected the demonization of Israel in Europe.

The EU's Fundamental Rights Agency did a non-random study among European Jews in 2018. It found that the most common antisemitic statements with which Jews are confronted on a regular basis are that Israelis behave like Nazis towards Palestinians. This was mentioned by 51% of those interviewed. This is one of multiple ways in which the demonization of Israel affects European Jews.

The demonization of Israel by tens of millions of European citizens inevitably fosters antisemitism against Jews in general. Two major operational conclusions should be drawn from this. First, the EU and its member states are required by law to do everything in their power to combat antisemitism effectively and safeguard the dignity of Jewish people. As European antisemitism is largely driven by the vastly widespread demonization of Israel, the EU has an obligation to do something about it. So far it has utterly failed to tackle European antisemitism.

Second: Successive Israeli governments have largely failed their citizens by giving far too little attention to the widespread demonization of Israel abroad and in Europe in particular. Nor has there been any pressure from the Knesset on the government to make an effort to deal with this problem. Israeli attitudes have to radically change to start fighting the demonization of their country.

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