



The Shifting Boundaries of Antisemitism

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: An important tool in understanding the dynamics of antisemitism is the identification of moments when its boundaries shift. This occurred with the Trump Peace Plan, the antisemitism crisis in the British Labour party, the UN's first World Conference against Racism, the huge outburst of antisemitism in France in 2000, and the German welcome policy for refugees and asylum seekers.

The world today exhibits a huge number of manifestations of classic antisemitism and anti-Israelism, making the phenomenon difficult to analyze. Tools and shortcuts are needed to navigate the mass of information to understand its dynamics. An important tool can be the identification of key moments when the boundaries of antisemitism shift.

A good example is the Trump Peace Plan, which caused a sudden shift in emphasis in the international debate on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The question of whether Israel would apply sovereignty over part of the West Bank, and what the reaction to that move would be, took on a dominant place in the discourse. Before that, much of the discussion focused on whether certain actions were good or bad for peace.

That form of "oldspeak" was always an abstract issue because the Palestinian Authority has never shown any interest in peace. That formerly dominant manner of discussion was generally accompanied by support for the so-called "two-state solution," an approach that most likely would not solve the conflict.

Another case of moving boundaries in recent years was developments in the British Labour Party with respect to antisemitism. Initially there was much denial at the top of the party that antisemitism was a serious problem. Slowly but surely, even senior Corbynites started to admit that it was. John McDonnell, former Shadow Chancellor and a long-time top Corbyn associate,

said earlier this year, "I think the truth has got to come out... if that means that the EHRC (Equality Human Rights Commission) comes to a finding saying that the Labour Party is institutionally antisemitic, well, so be it."

Evidence that not only the boundary had moved but that a turning point had been reached came in a leaked unedited major internal report a few weeks ago. The document was written to defend Corbyn's leadership. Its main claim was that his policies had been sabotaged by internal opposition. Yet even that report admitted the existence of antisemitism in the party and the poor handling of complaints about it. Somewhere at an unidentified point in the past few years, the boundaries on this issue moved. If an analysis had been conducted that identified attitudes toward antisemitism in the party, a clearer view of the dynamics of its antisemitism and anti-Israelism would have been revealed.

One of the prime examples this century of the shifting boundaries of antisemitism occurred at the UN's first World Conference against Racism in 2001 in Durban, South Africa. An explosion of anti-Israel hate, unprecedented in scale, occurred at that conference. Had there been an Israeli government body keeping an eye on shifts in global anti-Israelism, this would have flashed a huge warning sign. Serious discussions about what Israel should do to fight this hatred in a systematic way could have taken place but did not.

In 2000, there was another major shift of antisemitism boundaries in Europe. A large upsurge of antisemitic incidents started, mainly in France. This was related to the eruption of Arafat's so-called "Al-Aqsa intifada" in the Palestinian territories. At first it was difficult to register that this represented a change in a boundary of antisemitism. In preceding decades there had been several waves of antisemitism in Europe, but they did not last.

Sociologist Shmuel Trigano was probably the first to understand that this outburst was different. At the end of 2001, he started a publication that continued for two and half years entitled *Observatoire du Monde Juif* (Observatory of the Jewish World). His efforts, together with those of others, were of extreme importance.

The identification of this moving boundary was particularly important at the time because the French socialist Jospin government remained in stubborn denial. The many antisemitic incidents were written off as hooliganism.

The government's attitude would only start to change after the socialists' electoral defeat. In June 2002, the new center right interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, acknowledged the outburst of antisemitism and called for an all-out fight against it. Then, center-right president Jacques Chirac denied that

antisemitism existed in France at all. It took him until November 2003, when a Chabad house in Gagny was burned down, to admit the truth. By that point, antisemitic attacks on Jewish institutions had been taking place regularly for three years. From then on, the existence of antisemitism was publicly acknowledged by most French authorities.

In 1995, Chirac initiated a major positive shifting of the boundaries. For 50 years, French governments had stubbornly denied that the Vichy government had come to power legally. In this way they could deny responsibility for Vichy's crimes against the Jews. Chirac's socialist predecessor, President François Mitterrand, flatly refused to admit France's responsibility for these crimes. Later, journalist Pierre Péan published that Mitterrand in his youth had been an extreme rightist within the Vichy administration. He would later change sides and join the resistance.

The late Avi Beker, secretary general of the World Jewish Congress, wrote:

Mitterrand even voiced his opinion that reopening unhealed wounds was wrong. He claimed it was bad for France's memory and sense of cohesiveness. The press and public intellectuals collaborated with this attitude, both out of respect for Mitterrand and an inability to confront their country's complicity in what had happened.

In 1995, Chirac spoke at a memorial ceremony at the former Paris cycling stadium Vélodrome d'Hiver, where many Jews had been detained in the first French roundup. He mentioned the assistance France had given the Nazis in arresting Jews as a step on the way to their murder, saying:

France, the homeland of Light and Human Rights, land of welcome and asylum, France, that day committed the irremediable. It broke its word and delivered those it protected to their executioners...We maintain toward them an unforgivable debt.

Not only did the boundary shift, it was a turning point. In subsequent years, socialist PM Lionel Jospin, center-right PM Dominique Villepin, center-right President Nicolas Sarkozy, socialist President François Hollande, and the current centrist President Emmanuel Macron all publicly agreed with Chirac or even expanded on his words.

A major movement of an antisemitism boundary took place in 2015 in Germany, when Christian Democrat Chancellor Angela Merkel announced a welcome policy for refugees and asylum seekers. As most of the unvetted immigrants came from Muslim countries where antisemitism was rampant,

this policy contained great potential to cause a shift in the boundaries of antisemitism.

Until then, it might have seemed that Germany was on its way toward “normalization” concerning antisemitism. The last frenetic Nazis who had maintained their ideology after the 1945 defeat were dying off. Merkel’s predecessor, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, had undertaken the major step of recreating a sizable Jewish community in Germany. He opened the borders to perhaps up to 200,000 Russian Jews, which greatly strengthened the small community. New Jewish organizations sprang up in many towns. The presence of so many Jews in Germany strengthened hope of a new normal.

Merkel’s policy undid all of that. She became the largest European importer of antisemites.

In May 2020, Josef Schuster, chairman of the German Jewish umbrella organization Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland, admitted that he had given up on the utopian idea that there could be a Germany without antisemitism.

Another method of identifying the moving boundaries of antisemitism is to compare statistical studies on the subject over a number of years.

After the June 1967 Six Day War and probably also in the following decades, there was much sympathy for Israel in Europe. Yet the findings of a Bielefeld University study published in 2011 showed the extreme opposite. We don’t know when this radical shift occurred.

The study was undertaken in seven European countries. One of the questions was whether those polled agreed 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 percentages were Hungary 41%, the UK 42%, Germany 48%, and Portugal 49%. In Poland the figure was 63%.

The identification of the shifting boundaries of antisemitism provides a much clearer picture of the dynamics of antisemitism and anti-Israelism.

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center and a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He specializes in Israeli–Western European relations, antisemitism, and anti-Zionism, and is the author of The War of a Million Cuts.