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Is Anti-Zionism a Form of Anti-Semitism?

Anti-Zionism as a Jewish Phenomenon

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Is Anti-Zionism a Form of Anti-Semitism?

Anti-Zionism as a Jewish Phenomenon

Visiting the Quatzenheim Jewish cemetery in eastern France on Wednesday after dozens of graves were vandalized with swastikas, French President Emmanuel Macron pledged to take “legal measures” to combat anti-Semitism, saying “We shall act, we shall pass laws, we shall punish.” He then visited the Holocaust Memorial in Paris alongside the presidents of the Senate and the National Assembly. The following day, in a speech at the 34th annual dinner of the group CRIF, Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France, Macron promised that his country would implement a definition of anti-Semitism in its legislation in accordance with that used by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. This includes anti-Zionism, which Macron claimed to be “one of the modern forms of anti-Semitism”.⁽¹⁾ There is no doubt that the abhorrent graffiti desecrating those graves is anti-Semitic hate crime. But how does this relate to anti-Zionism and positions on Israel?

Regardless of whether Macron really wants to, or even can, pass legislation of this kind, it seems that he is ignorant about both anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. He will be surprised to find that not only are some of the most important thinkers on anti-Zionism Jewish intellectuals of various political persuasions, but anti-Zionism itself, like Zionism, is a Jewish phenomenon – which emerged originally as a Jewish response to Zionism. It will be difficult for Macron to classify anti-Zionism as anti-Semitic given that there is no connection between the two ideas.

It may be true that following or shortly before the establishment of Israel and amidst intense Zionist activity in Palestine, there may have been some intersection between indigenous rejection of Zionism as a colonial (not Jewish) project and some elements of anti-Semitic propaganda in Europe. This propaganda may have provided terminology and conspiracy theories ready for import to Palestine, but there was no historical or theoretical relationship between the two. Palestinian and Arab rejection of Zionism was not a matter of ethnic, religious or social hostility to Jews but rejection of colonial settlement of their country, just as Algerians refused to entertain settler colonialism in their own country, and other people have done and would do regardless of their religion and the religion of the settlers\colonizers. All the resolutions passed by the Palestinian and Syrian conferences of

¹ See: “Macron announces measures to combat anti-Semitism in France”, *France 24*, February 21, 2019, accessed at: <https://amp.france24.com/en/20190220-macron-announces-measures-combat-anti-semitism-france-crif-definition-anti-zionism>; and Richard Lough, “France’s Macron says anti-Zionism is a form of anti-Semitism”, *Reuters*, February 21, 2019, accessed at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-antisemitism-idUKKCN1QA1GX>



the 1920s made early distinctions between the “national” (i.e. indigenous) Jews and Jewish settlers. The abhorrent (although rare) reliance of some Arab nationalist discourse on elements of European far-right language, especially after the defeat of 1967, represents the generalization of hostile propaganda in the context of a military conflict. Israeli domestic propaganda has hardly been shy of using racist imagery and language targeting Arabs and Muslims. Indeed, anti-Arab racism has penetrated the Israeli educational curriculum, military and media discourse, and many literary works.⁽²⁾

Anti-Zionist Jews have justified their position based on religious, moral or intellectual arguments, whether leftist or liberal. Just as there are anti-Zionist Jews, in Europe and the US there are many anti-Semites who admire both Israel and Zionism. The object of admiration and praise could be the strong settler state that Zionism established, Israeli militarism, or the model that Israel has presented a in fighting both terrorism and Muslims. In some cases, the admiration is collusive, due to the fact that Zionism acts to rid Europe of its Jewish population. This is what anti-Semites want. Anti-Semitic currents watched contentedly as the Jews gathered in one country in the Middle East, no longer a bother to Europe.

There is no substantive overlap between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. But why say that anti-Zionism is a Jewish phenomenon?

Zionism emerged following the creation of a new definition of Judaism that historically transformed the meaning of Jewishness. It is logical that the first reaction to this act would be Jewish. For the religious, Zionism re-formulated Jewishness from the “chosen people of God,” “the people of the book,” or from “a people unlike other peoples” into an ethnic nation that, like other nineteenth-century European nations, seeks to achieve national sovereignty in a national state (only outside Europe in this case). For secularists, Zionism re-formulated Judaism and transformed it from a religion – which should not have prevented their integration into the nations of the secular states of which they were citizens – into an ethnic identity.

The first anti-Zionist stance came from within the chief Jewish religious currents, not only because Zionism is a secular movement, but because Zionism committed the unforgivable crime of secularizing Judaism itself by converting the religion into an ethnic nationality.

Jewish religious currents have varied in their understanding of God’s chosen people. Some groups consider God to have placed the Jews above other peoples, while others derive the meaning of “chosen” from the time of prophecy, resulting in ethical and religious duties and additional burdens rather than privileges. There are many other ideas. However, there is a general consensus rejecting the idea that Jewishness means a nation striving for a state in this world. Some of these movements

2 Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Teichman, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict: Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Mazal Mualem, “Anti-Arab racism becomes tool in Israeli elections”, *Al-Monitor*, February 10, 2015, accessed at: <http://bit.ly/2Udgp5i>; Nurit Peled-Elhanan, *Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Ben White, *Palestinians in Israel: Segregation, Discrimination and Democracy*, forward by Haneen Zoabi (London: Pluto Press, 2012),. Ali Abunimah, “Anti-Arab racism and incitement in Israel”, *The Electronic Intifada*, 30 March 2008, accessed at: <http://bit.ly/2IAm58V>;



are waiting for the Messiah to build his heavenly state and save the Jewish people. Zionism is thus considered a false prophecy, represented by the state project, proclaiming itself to be a (false) Messiah and interfering in the work of God. The majority of Jewish religious currents, whether Hasidic, pseudo-mystic, or modalist ultra-orthodox, have opposed this secularization of the Jewish community as a nation rather than a religion.⁽³⁾

There was a narrow stream of Jewish religious thought that intersected with Zionism, producing the Mizrahi movement. This movement, in the opinion of myself and many others, formed the nucleus of the subsequent overlap between nationalism and religion in the movements of settlers and extremist nationalist religious movements in Israel. Until this movement grew, there was a complete break between Jewish religiosity and “Zionization”. The expansion of national-religious movements in Israel can be traced to the growth in the influence of the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva in Jerusalem and Israeli euphoria after the “divine miracle” of 1967, which led to the occupation of “Judea and Samaria” (the West Bank) and the “reunification” of biblical Israel under the State of Israel. Until then secular Zionism had made use of religion out of necessity, because it was ultimately impossible to justify choosing Palestine to establish a state without the biblical connection, and also because the answer given by Zionism and the State of Israel to the question of “who is a Jew?” – a question necessary to define citizenship – was that of Jews as defined by Judaism. I have long predicted that these movements would expand and their discourse become hegemonic as the result of the practices of the occupation and the convergence of Zionist discourse with religious discourse in justifying the occupation of Jerusalem and the West Bank.⁽⁴⁾

The second current at odds with Zionism is the Jewish left. There were those in Communist parties (particularly the Russian Bolsheviks) who considered Zionism a bourgeois movement leading to the separation of Jewish workers from the working-class struggle for a fairer society; for them, the Jewish question and the oppression of all minorities could be resolved by the end of exploitation and class struggle. There were also Jewish Bundists, who understood Jewishness as both religious and national\cultural and believed that the Jewish issue will be solved in socialism, but that there were problems specific to Jews that needed to be resolved by gaining legal minority status; they saw Zionism as an isolationist movement seeking to join colonial activity in the Arab Mashreq and not a solution to the Jewish issue in Europe.⁽⁵⁾ In Russian domains, Poland and the Baltic countries the Jewish left organized in movements and unions bred some Zionist currents yearning to combine national and class liberation through the establishment of socialist colonies in Palestine. But they failed to

3 The position of Orthodox Jews is well-known, including the formation of the anti-Zionist Agudat Israel party in 1912. There is no space here to cite extensive examples of the sharp and emotional hostility that Orthodox Jews felt towards Zionism. But the same also applies to Reform Judaism. Anti-Zionist positions appeared even before the First Zionist Congress in 1897, for example at the conservative Frankfurt Conference (1845) and the Philadelphia Rabbinical Conference (1869), or in the Pittsburgh Platform (1885) and a resolution issued at the first Central Conference of the Reform Group (1890).

4 Azmi Bishara, “Dawwamat ad-Din wa’d-Dawla fi Isra’il”, *ad-Dirasat al-Filistiniyya* 1:3 (Summer 1990), p. 24 (accessed on 28/02/2019, <https://bit.ly/2EYv7hv>).

5 The Jewish section of the Soviet Communist Party (*Yevseksiya*), for example, took an explicitly anti-Zionist position in its efforts to mobilize Jewish workers in revolutionary organizations, and called for a solution to the “Jewish question” based on the struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and racial and religious discrimination, which included the struggle against Jewish capitalists allied with Zionism.

resolve the contradiction between what they saw as national and class liberation and its practices in colonizing the homeland of another people and remained captive to this contradiction. The left-wing anti-Zionist movement remained strong throughout the 20th century since the proportion of Jews in leftist, communist and socialist movements in Europe, including France, was high relative to the proportion of Jews in the general population. They believed the solution to the Jewish issue was to solve the social class problem in Europe.

A third current is represented by the Jewish Assimilationists made up of liberals, democrats, and other non-ideological forces, including the Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen and the writer Karl Kraus, and many more. Even the father of Zionism himself, Herzl, was in favor of assimilationism before he witnessed the Dreyfus trial in France. Most of them believed that the transition of Europeans to liberal democracy guaranteed Jews citizenship and integration into their societies.⁽⁶⁾ This was the case for the majority of the Jews of Germany, France and Britain; they were taken aback by Nazism, which reminded them of their Jewishness. This was given particular expression by the personal misfortunes and tragic endings of the likes of Stefan Zweig, and perhaps also Walter Benjamin. But more important are the millions of Jews that no one writer or thinker gives expression to. In Zygmunt Bauman's work drawing out the lessons from the Holocaust, especially in his *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he makes an attempt to tie a general position against racism, nationalist extremism and xenophobia to an opposition to the Israeli treatment of the Palestinian people. Throughout his book he rejects the Israeli claim to speak in the name of the victims and the Zionist instrumentalization of the Holocaust.⁽⁷⁾ Hannah Arendt and other thinkers preceded with similar critiques that stemmed from universal morals of the holocaust and rejection of any kind of racism, including Jewish racism.

Zionism has since blamed Jews that it considers to have been deceived by the ideas of socialism and liberalism for the failures of their politics. Zionist writers boast of Zionism's success in embracing the prevailing ideology of the era, nationalism, : Zionists, once a minority among Jews, have succeeded where the ideas most popular among Jews have failed. According to their view, Zionism recognized that the solution to ethnic issues was not liberal democracy or socialism but the establishment of the state. According to his view, Nazism and anti-Semitism are the best evidence that Zionism was the correct choice and that assimilationists in Germany, France and the rest of Europe were wrong.

None of the discussion so far took into account the nature of this "national solution" to the Jewish question: a colonial project implemented at others' expense. This is still reflecting on an internal, primarily Jewish, European debate.

How will Mr. Macron deal with these facts? Ignorance is not an excuse for a head of state, and an important state at that. These discussions are part of the history of France and not just Germany. As

6 During the first half of the 19th century Marx and Bruno Bauer debated whether liberal democracy or socialism was the solution. Bauer believed that citizenship in any secular European democratic state was sufficient to integrate Jews as citizens, while Marx believed that society must first be liberated from capital in order for Jews to likewise be liberated.

7 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).



Herzl's experience shows, French anti-Semitism contributed to the emergence of Zionism. France provided a prototype of civil integration, but anti-Semitism nonetheless reared its ugly head in the Dreyfus trial, "awakening" Herzl and opening his eyes to a "reality" he had never seen before: that the discrimination against Jews in European countries was a chronic and incurable disease and Jews would remain foreigners in Europe no matter how hard they tried to assimilate.⁽⁸⁾

The objective unintended ideological ally of Zionism is anti-Semitism. This was observed by the Jewish thinker Claude Montefiore at the beginning of the twentieth century in his criticism of the creation of a dual loyalty for the Jews.⁽⁹⁾ Furthermore, Zionism from the outset not only considered anti-Semitism an eternal disease plaguing the peoples of the countries where the Jews live, but also modelled a negative (almost racist) view of the character of a weak, humiliated and rejected Jew who lacked national character and national feeling.

Herzl's book describes the Jewish state with derogatory descriptions of Russian Jewish immigrants to Central Europe, in terminology that would almost not look out of place in an anti-Semitic dictionary.⁽¹⁰⁾ Later, Zionism developed the "profile" of the Israeli Jew, who is self-confident to the point of aggression and who works the land and carries arms, and who manages to save himself from victimhood by becoming an occupier (a victimizer).

Historically, it was the anti-Semitism and the waves of persecution suffered by Jews that gave birth to their project. Jewish groups were persuaded to emigrate from their countries under the weight of every wave of anti-Semitism in Europe, whether it was the Black Hundred in Russia, the Nazis in Germany or the racism in France. But after every wave, it was the US (when possible), and not Israel, that was the destination of the majority of immigrants. Even when persecuted, most Jews did not become Zionists. For them, the Zionist project was distinct and sought to achieve goals that had nothing to do with the alleviation of their suffering.

It is natural for non-Jews not to be Zionists. Zionism is a Jewish movement. It does not concern non-Jews unless it is a threat or involves ideas and practices that contradict their principles. And not every intellectual that disagreed with Zionism necessarily became hostile or essentially antizionist. Nor, certainly, did this have any negative position towards Jews.

Those who hated the Jews for religious, ethnic or social reasons (the three sources of anti-Semitism) did so before the rise of Zionism. The majority of those who were against Zionism were Jews. Anti-Semitism, religious, social and racist, is a racist phenomenon that existed before Zionism. But it is

⁸ The Dreyfus Affair began in 1894 when Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew, was charged with treason on the basis of accusations that he had sent confidential French files to Germany. The Affair divided French intellectuals and politicians until 1906, and resulted in the "solution to the Jewish problem" becoming an obsession for Herzl. See: Katrin Schultheiss, "The Dreyfus Affair and History," *Journal of The Historical Society*, vol. 12, no. 2 (June 2012), pp. 189-203, accessed on 28/2/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2HaWdOf>; "Herzl," *Neue Freie Presse*, June 1899, in: Alex Bein, *Theodor Herzl: A Biography* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1941).

⁹ Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, (New York: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1992) Rev.ed.1998, p. 232.

¹⁰ Theodor Herzl, *A Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question* (New York: The Maccabean Publishing Co, 1904), pp. 12 - 13.

no longer the central phenomenon in the political and social life of the West, and it never became a global phenomenon, unlike what Israel has tried to portray it for political gain.⁽¹¹⁾

It cannot be said that Arabs and Muslims in the 19th century were anti-Zionist. They did not even know what it was, and it did not mean anything to them. When hostility to Zionism arose in Palestine, it was not intellectual, but rather the collective attitude of the peasants, intellectuals and national bourgeoisie of a people who had been living in Palestine for centuries opposed to settlement on their land, especially after realizing that it was a political project to establish a state following the Balfour Declaration adopted as part of the British Mandate.

The establishment of a Jewish state in a country where an Arab majority and a small Jewish minority lived at the time could only mean their expulsion from their land. Tolerance prevailed at that time, with religious Jews living in Palestine before Zionism, as is clear from the many Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Safed. Arab peoples had no familiarity with anti-Semitism. The Ottoman Empire and Arab countries occasionally underwent waves of incitement and brutal practices against religious minorities, especially in times of crisis. Yet this was the exception rather than the rule. There were no particularly hostile anti-Jewish phenomena that could be called anti-Semitism. It is noteworthy that one of the first condemnations against secular Zionist settlement in Palestine was issued by the Orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem. They were the first to denounce Zionist settlement in Palestine ideologically in a petition directed to the Ottoman Sultan.⁽¹²⁾

Jewish attitudes on Zionism have changed since it succeeded in establishing a state. Zionism remained a minority movement among Jews internationally until the Israeli victory in the 1967 war, which aroused sweeping Jewish sympathy with Israel and convinced Jews around the world that the project was realistic and not just adventurism. But the most important change happened inside Israel itself. As the reality of the state is different from the idea and the movement and its ties to interests, internal economic and social contradictions, issues of Israeli identity, internal and external alliances and policies, regional and international conflicts and geo-strategic issues. Many religious parties have become tied to services provided by the state and “Zionized” by their involvement in Israeli nationalism during the struggle against the Arabs. An Israeli left and right that had only negligible affinity with the Jewish left and right before the establishment of the Jewish state emerged alongside Israeli militarism and vanity of power with a conflict arising over the character of the secular\religious state. Herzl became a moderate secularist compared to those in this state. He supported granting the Arabs equal civil rights and advocated avoiding Jerusalem and the so-called “Temple Mount” in

11 The US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar has been the target of a broad campaign accusing her of anti-Semitism because of a tweet criticizing an Israeli pressure group (AIPAC), a lobby that works openly and officially to influence policymakers whose activities should be subject to criticism – harsh criticism if necessary. Within about twelve hours the Democratic party leadership had issued a statement rebuking her for her tweet, which she in turn apologized for. Many Republicans have continued to call for her expulsion from Congress’ Foreign Affairs Committee. See: “Muslim Congresswoman Ilhan Omar in anti-Semitism row after criticising pro-Israel politicians” *The New Arab*, 12 February, 2019, accessed at: <http://bit.ly/2EcDYUV>; John Bowden, “Omar deletes tweets at center of anti-Semitism controversy”, *The Hill*, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Vmwcf>; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Ilhan Omar Apologizes for Statements Condemned as Anti-Semitic”, *The New York Times*, Feb. 11, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2I9ywY3>.

12 Zvi Sobel, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (eds.), *Tradition, Innovation, Conflict: Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Israel*, (New York, State University of New York Press, 2012), pp. 5 - 7.

order to preserve the secular character of his future state. But Israel, which occupies the whole of Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, besieges Gaza and possesses nuclear weapons, continues to play the role of victim and use the memory of the Holocaust to represent victims who never asked for Israel to represent them, as well as accusing anyone who criticizes Israel's policy in the West of anti-Semitism.

Issues of racism and Zionism overlapped with international policies. On November 10, 1975, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted resolution 3379, which stated that "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination." This resolution was rescinded by Resolution 46 / 86 on 16 December 1991, after the collapse of Communism.⁽¹³⁾

In both instances, the considerations were related to international alliances and a change in the international balance of power between the stage of alliances between neutral countries and the socialist camp in the 1960s and 1970s, where the PLO achieved a qualitative weight, and the breakdown of these alliances. Israel's alliances with the United States played a key role in all this, but anti-Semitism was not the matter at hand as much as Israeli practices against the Palestinian people under occupation. This has not changed but has rather been exacerbated, with increased levels of racism in Israel itself, according to all kinds of Israeli surveys.⁽¹⁴⁾

The extreme rightist of today's western countries whose political discourse and culture are consistent with the "profile" of an anti-Semite is an admirer of Israel and Netanyahu. He is in awe of Israel's construction of the separation wall in Palestine and its dealings with the Arabs, which provide an example for Europe and America to follow, loving Putin and Trump and hating Muslims. Contemporary anti-Semitism is not anti-Zionism, but xenophobia, and especially Islamophobia. Anti-Semitism cannot be fought by currying favor with Israeli lobbyists and politicians during a lobby meeting, but requires us to combat all kinds of racism, whether directed against Jews, Muslims, blacks or whites.

¹³ "United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379: Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination", 10 November 1975, accessed at: <http://bit.ly/2Tha6QM>; "General Assembly Resolution 46/86, Revocation of Resolution 3379", 16 December 1991, accessed at: <http://bit.ly/2SYRWDW>.

¹⁴ See: "Huquq al-Insan 2016: Tahdidat wa-Furas", ACRI, 16/12/2016 (accessed on 26/02/2019 at <http://bit.ly/2lErrU>); Aviram Zino, "Racism in Israel on the Rise", Ynet News, 12 August 2007, accessed at: <http://bit.ly/2Nu0zAH>.