



The Uses of Anti-Semitism

The Israeli military campaign of March-April 2002 was accompanied by a heightened rhetoric of anti-Semitic accusations against international critics of Israel, particularly those in Europe. The main aim of this campaign has been to intimidate and silence those critics. While serious incidents of anti-Jewish sentiments and acts of vandalism against Jewish institutions in Europe and elsewhere took place, the Israeli rhetoric was disingenuous because it collapsed incidents of right-wing anti-Jewish activities with the world wide campaign against Israeli army atrocities against civilians in Palestine.

One should neither underestimate nor belittle the residual waves of anti-Semitism that still exist in Europe and elsewhere. The torching of synagogues and Jewish centers in several West European cities have marred the growing movement of anti-Israeli colonialism and often sidetracked supporters of Palestinians among European and American liberals into an unnecessary self-defensive mode. It should be mentioned that these anti-Jewish attacks, whether emanating from Islamic

militants, or from right wing circles received worldwide condemnation, including a vigorous declaration from Palestinian and Arab intellectuals and activists in Europe. Today the main target of metropolitan racism is third world immigrants in the major metropolis: Turks, Algerians, Indians, and Pakistanis. A curious duality in this context emerged about the new perception of Jews and Israelis. While old prejudices persist, there is also a substantial degree of admiration and identification with the Israeli military machine among the most reactionary elements in the world today: apartheid advocates, Christian fundamentalists of the Jerry Falwell types, skin heads, and global right-wing anti-terrorists.

It has become customary now, both in Israel and among apologists of the Israeli state, to associate criticism of Israel with various strands of anti-Semitism. This usually aims at sowing fear and intimidation, particularly with European liberals and social democratic governments. These governments and intellectuals were so burdened with their dark past during the 1930s and 1940s that the accusations effectively silenced them from speaking up against Israel's excesses. It also succeeded in isolating Jewish critics of Israel, like Noam Chomsky Norman Finkelstein and many others by labeling them as 'self hating Jews'.

European reactions differ from American ones. Having gone through a violent process of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, Europe clearly sees Israel today through the prism of that colonial experience, as the last outpost of imperial subjugation in the 21st century. Even a country like Germany today, including right-of-centre German parties, feels able to direct its criticism at Israeli policies

without being constrained by its past. This is not a sign of anti-Semitic revivalism as many Israelis feel but an indication that Israel is seen as having transcended its own past. By contrast, America sees Israel as a New World country engaged in a process of settling an ancient land to which the Jews have biblical claims. This is obviously an exaggerated stereotype of how the two cultures see the Hebrew state, but it helps to understand why there is a tendency in the US - visible in the Congress, among Christian fundamentalists, and among key public intellectuals - to identify with Israel as a product of the American experience of conquering unknown lands on behalf of "Civilization." Resistance to Israeli hegemony, and Palestinian violence in general, was seen therefore as a continuation of the old anti-Semitic tradition. No distinction is generally made in those circles between bona fide rejection of Israeli occupation and violence against Israeli civilians.

This time, however, Israel's ability to use anti-Semitism as a tool of intimidation has been dented. Palestinian suicide attacks against Israeli civilian targets, and the failure of Arafat to contain them, provided Israel with initial sympathy for its military campaign against targets in the PNA and among militant groups. A reversal of these gains occurred when these targets were extended, as a systematic campaign by the Israeli army, against the civilian population and highlighted by the atrocities in Jenin and Nablus and the plunder of public institutions and private homes by members of the once disciplined Israeli army. Numerous reports of Israeli soldiers running away with stolen gadgets, private savings, and jewelry appropriated from houses in which searches were made

became too widespread to deny. In few cases, the soldiers were caught red-handed by members of the diplomatic community. This made it difficult to sustain the initial image of a people's army defending its home turf from terrorism.

Once the campaign was underway, Sharon's official pronouncement made clear the true nature of the campaign: to destroy and eliminate the transitional arrangements of the Oslo Accords; to make sure that even the most outlying settlement remain intact in any future arrangement with the Palestinians; and finally to ensure that no meaningful Palestinian state will emerge.

With the termination of the main thrust of military intrusions in the cities in April, the orchestrated campaign against 'European anti-Semitism' reached a new height, and became a major weapon in the hands of the Israeli establishment against support for Palestinian self-determination and even the mildest censure of Israeli military power. Eventually, this campaign began to boomerang. Several outstanding Jewish intellectuals and artists countered by reminding the Sharon government that the new wave of actual anti-Semitism is fuelled and reinforced by the brutal actions of the IDF under the guise of fighting terrorism. This was the position of Woody Allen in the Cannes film in response to a call by American Jewish organizations for boycotting French and European cultural activities. Like many of his colleagues in Europe, he sees the attacks in the context of new demographic and social conditions. And, on this issue, there is widespread agreement by major commentators in Europe today. "To weave all these strands [attacks on Jewish centres, rise of right-wing parties, and criticism for Israel] together as evidence of a climate of anti-

Semitism in Europe, however, is so distorting as to be wrong," wrote the Guardian on May 16th. "The rise of far-right parties reflects less anti-Semitism than hostility to immigration - much of it from Muslim countries. The pro-Palestinian demonstrations were a response to what Europe saw as the excesses of Israel's military action." The fact that the Israeli polity does not see this important distinction undoubtedly contributes to the delay in beginning a political solution to this problem.



JQF in Arabic

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