LETTERS ON LIBERTY

RETHINKING ANTI-SEMITISM

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⊤ LETTERS
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RETHINKING ANTI-SEMITISM

Although anti-Semitism is often known as 'the oldest hatred', it has shown a remarkable capacity to mutate over the decades and indeed centuries. Jew-hatred today is, in important respects, fundamentally different from that of 20 years ago - let alone 200.

Loathing of Jews is often seen as one unbroken phenomenon; however, the historical discontinuities are striking. For example, anti-Semitism was transformed in much of Europe during the nineteenth century. Hannah Arendt, a German-Jewish political thinker, described how in the late nineteenth century there was a fundamental shift from religious Jew-hatred to modern anti-Semitism. While the old incarnation focused on Christian notions of Jews as killers of Christ and of children, the new form emerged, paradoxically, with the granting of more civil rights to Jews in many parts of Europe and a shift towards assimilation. This new form of anti-Semitism was ultimately genocidal in intent and was central to the totalitarian movements that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century.[i]

In more recent times, animosity towards Jews has taken on new shapes for different reasons. The advent of the state of Israel in 1948, for instance, did not

itself cause resurgent anti-Semitism, but gave it a new focus. Pan-Arabism, and later Palestinian nationalism, which had a progressive impetus at their inception, both at times included anti-Semitic elements. These in turn have influenced the debate in the West.

Anti-Semitism in the twenty-first century has morphed again. Identity politics, and its division of identities into hierarchies of victimhood, has laid the basis for the perception of Jews as beneficiaries of white privilege. This has been combined with Islamism - an ideology that has a genocidal anti-Semitism at its core - in a bizarre new hybrid.

A focus on clamping down on anti-Semitic speech is likely to be counter-productive - Jew-hatred needs to be challenged openly, rather than driven underground.

Mainstream understandings of anti-Semitism have failed to keep up with this change. There is still a temptation to focus overly on the far right - an understandable inclination given the history of the Holocaust - along with a reluctance to criticise Islamism for fear of being branded 'Islamophobic' (a category that unhelpfully blurs together hatred of Muslims, criticism of Islam as a religion and condemnation of Islamism as a political movement).[ii]

In some respects, the failure to grapple with contemporary anti-Semitism is an extreme example of the more general inadequacy of our contemporary political language. For instance, the terms 'right' and 'left' continue to be used, despite the reality of their meaning having drifted a long way from their originals. Holding on to these labels only obscures the scale of important political shifts. When it comes to anti-Semitism, this becomes a significant problem.

In broad terms, we can generally understand contemporary anti-Semitism in Britain as existing in three main forms: far-right Jew-hatred, a new far-left anti-Semitism and the threat of modern Islamism. Firstly, there has always been a heavy focus on the far right - from the Blackshirts to the National Front. But in recent years, many have broadened this to include elements of populism - confusingly characterised as far right. Second, many have voiced concerns about the far left, mainly focusing on the recent phenomenon of Corbynism, with its avid hostility to Israel. (The rise of identity politics has also started to cause concern in this regard, which we'll explore later.) Finally, the rise of Islamist extremism has also played a key role in the prevalence of anti-Semitism today.

This *Letter* will critically examine each of these elements in turn, and the fundamental misconceptions associated with each one (even the labels used to

describe them can be misleading). More often than not, the presumed antidote for anti-Semitism is found in censorship. But history shows us that simply banning bigoted views (or hiding them from public view) doesn't make them go away. This *Letter* will explore how a focus on clamping down on anti-Semitic speech is likely to be counter-productive - Jew-hatred needs to be challenged openly, rather than driven underground.

Three rubrics for anti-Semitism

Let us explore these three factors. For many years, a large part of the discussion of anti-Semitism in Britain focused on the far right, and what was perceived as the potential danger of re-emergent Nazism - often simplistically understood as a form of extreme nationalism. Although it was generally recognised that most far-right groups were small in size, the concern was that, if left unchecked, they could win mass support.

There was nothing inherently wrong with monitoring such groups to some degree; even the smallest ones were certainly vile. The problem was that the corollary of overestimating far-right anti-Semitism was the

underestimation of the potential for it to emerge in other places.

In this context, it is unfortunate that the 2016 Brexit vote supercharged the discussion in some quarters on the supposed dangers of the far right. This was due to the mistaken conflation of grassroots democratic electoral rebellions with far-right movements. As a result, many prominent critics of anti-Semitism saw the referendum result - or the election of Donald Trump in the US - as laying the basis for a populist resurgence of hatred towards Jews: with populism in this case often used as a synonym for nationalism or even nascent fascism.

This rage against Brexit as laying the basis for a resurgence of nationalist and even proto-Nazi anti-Semitism is misplaced for several reasons. From a historical perspective, it is misleading to view the Nazis as traditional nationalists. As Arendt argued in her magisterial study on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

> *'Modern antisemitism grew in proportion as traditional nationalism declined, and reached its climax at the exact moment when the European system of nation-states and its precarious balance of power crashed.'[iii]*

Arendt went on to argue that the Nazis had a contempt for the narrowness of nationalism and the

provincialism of the nation state. Instead, they insisted that their movement was international, rather than national in scope.

From a contemporary perspective, Brexit should be seen as a movement *for* freedom rather than *against* it. It essentially represented a desire for national self-determination - labelling such an aspiration as 'right wing' is a travesty. This appeal for sovereignty was the reason the slogan 'taking back control' had so much resonance with Leave voters. In contrast, the Nazis were entirely contemptuous of the right to self-determination. Their drive to invade and control the entire European continent shows they couldn't have been otherwise.

Jews are too often seen as 'hyper-white' beneficiaries of an identitarian hierarchy.

In addition, avid EU supporters who conflate anti-Semitism and Brexit tend to forget that many of those they themselves criticised as anti-Semitic were profoundly anti-Brexit. For example, the Momentum movement responsible for much of the anti-Israel agitation within the Labour Party was doggedly in favour of retaining EU membership. And Jeremy Corbyn, despite his historical record of EU scepticism, said little or nothing about it when it really mattered.

If the debate on the right - or more precisely what is labelled the 'right' - is confused, so too is the discussion on the 'woke' left. Commentators generally fail to recognise that the contemporary left is fundamentally different from what went by that name in the past.

Historically, European socialism existed as a mass movement roughly from the latter part of the nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century. Its goal was to overthrow capitalism, or at least to replace it with an economy based on production for need rather than for profit. Some of these parties - for example, the Social Democrats in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century - had mass support from the emerging working class.

A strand of anti-Semitism existed among the German left long before the Nazis came to power - there was a tendency among some leftists to blame Jews for the failures of capitalism. This is where the phrase 'the socialism of fools' - usually attributed to August Bebel - comes from.[iv] As a leader of the German Social Democratic Party, he derided the trend among some left-wingers to scapegoat Jews.

Modern or 'woke' leftism, by contrast, has an entirely different ethos. First, it tends to have minimal

working-class support. On the contrary, it represents the outlook of the professional middle class, which has become the dominant ideological force in society. Identity politics is central to its world view, which runs directly counter to the universal and radical aspirations that inspired old-style socialism.

Jews all too often come out badly from this viewpoint. They are often seen as 'hyper-white' beneficiaries of an identitarian hierarchy.[v] They are seen as playing a key role in subjugating people of colour. The old idea of elite Jews lording over the masses has taken on a new form.

Many critics of anti-Zionism fail to investigate why nowadays it is so often driven by anti-Semitism.

Some commentators have sought to solve this prejudice by arguing that identity politics should be reformed to classify Jews as an oppressed identity group. For example, David Baddiel's best-selling book *Jews Don't Count* argues that Jews should be classified as part of the black and minority ethnic (BAME) group.[vi] He even raises the concomitant possibility of Jews benefiting from positive discrimination. Rather than challenging the fundamental flaws of identity politics, he ends up reinforcing what is a retrograde outlook.

Another charge made against the contemporary left is that its characteristic anti-Zionism is often a disguised form of anti-Semitism. It is certainly not the case that all criticism of Israel is inherently anti-Semitic, but the double standards applied to Israel are often astounding. Israel is often reprimanded for actions that would receive little if any attention if they happened elsewhere.

For example, according to B'Tselem, an Israeli human-rights organisation, Israeli security forces killed 313 Palestinians in 2021, a significant proportion of whom were combatants.[vii] In contrast, one estimate of Iraqi civilians killed by war-related violence since 2003 is between 184,000 and 207,000.[viii] This does not mean that all Israeli killing is justified, but that anti-Israel activists tend to lose all sense of perspective when they discuss its failings.

Many critics of anti-Zionism fail to investigate why it is now so often driven by anti-Semitism. Typically, these critics recognise the outsized hostility to Israel but cannot explain why it is so prevalent. They fail to understand that, from an identitarian perspective, grossly disproportionate criticism of Israel makes sense. From this viewpoint, Palestinians can be regarded as people of colour suffering from oppression at the hands of the Israelis, while

American Jews can be seen as part of a privileged, white elite dominating ethnic minorities in the US.

But this surge of anti-Israel feeling in recent years has another important contributory element: it relates to the rise of Islamism in the Middle East and beyond, as well as its attendant supporters in the West.

> *These shapeshifting definitions have helped create the basis for a new hybrid ideology, and indeed hybrid anti-Semitism.*

To understand this point properly it is necessary to make a key (and frequently ignored or confused) distinction between Islam and Islamism. The first is a religion founded in the seventh century with about two billion followers worldwide. The second is what has been called a form of 'religionised politics', that first emerged in the 1920s in the Middle East and has come into sharp focus in the West in the decades following the Islamist terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC on 11 September 2001.

As with Christianity, Islam has historically included some discriminatory elements against Jews.[ix] For example, some critics often point to the status of Jews (and some other religious groups) as 'dhimmi' in

Islamic lands - meaning an inferior but protected minority.

In contrast, Islamism is better seen as a political movement that uses a religious idiom - rather than an extreme form of the religion. As Bassam Tibi, a German expert of Syrian origin, argues:

> *'It is based not on the religious faith of Islam but on an ideological use of religion within the political realm.'*[x]

Islamism first emerged in its original Sunni form with the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. From the start, it was characterised not just by a hatred of Jews but with the ultimate goal of exterminating them. Sayyid Qutb, its leading ideologue, spelt this out in his *Our Struggle With the Jews*, and other works. From *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious anti-Semitic forgery first published in Russia in 1903, he lifted the idea of a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. Qutb adapted it to include Muslims as subjects of the supposed international Jewish conspiracy. From his perspective, America was ruled by Jews, and Christians served as their proxies.

This same conspiratorial outlook is reproduced, for example, in the 1988 covenant for Hamas, the Islamist organisation which controls Gaza.[xi] This is hardly

surprising since Hamas is itself an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and there is much borrowing of ideas and rhetoric from the work of Qutb.[xii] The Covenant, which is explicitly genocidal and available to read in English, defines the organisation as waged in a struggle not against Israel but against 'world Zionism'.

Ironically, the anti-Semitic tropes apparent in Islamism were often themselves ultimately of European origin. They were lifted from the new totalitarian form of anti-Semitism that was emerging in Europe in the late nineteenth century. It was already apparent in France in the 1880s and 1890s, reaching its apotheosis in Nazi Germany.[xiii]

Banning anti-Semitism paradoxically undermines the struggle to fight it, as it means it cannot be challenged in the open.

In more general terms, Islamism can be seen as a movement that rejects many elements of modernity. It is sceptical of the nation state and instead advocates a new Islamic order. It is also hostile to what it regards as Western values, secularism and democracy, although it is willing to use elections to its advantage. In its own way, it is also identitarian - upholding Islam as a form of political identity.

The striking thing to notice here is the substantial degree of overlap with the identity politics of the woke left.xiv Both Islamism and modern leftism in their different ways tend to be hostile to the nation state as a community for democratic representation. Islamists aspire to an Islamic international order, while left-leaning globalists generally favour giving more power to transnational organisations such as the EU. Both are hostile to what they regard as Western values, and both have an identitarian worldview. There are, of course, differences (for example, in relation to gay rights and women's equality), but the similarities are nonetheless striking. Neither is it incidental that the two sets of views often have an affinity for one another.

These shapeshifting definitions have helped create the basis for a new hybrid ideology, and indeed hybrid anti-Semitism. Contemporary leftists, for example, often comfortably take on board many Islamist notions. For example, they are frequently willing to offer their support for Hamas and the Shiite Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, despite their openly exterminationist stance towards Jews.xv Similarly, they are more than comfortable with the slogan 'from the river to the sea' (meaning from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean), despite the fact that it can easily be taken as a call for the elimination of Jews in that area.

Tackling anti-Semitism

A pre-condition for tackling this new hybrid form of anti-Semitism is to develop a proper understanding of it. An outlook which exaggerates the importance of the far right, or fails to grapple with the key political shifts of recent years, is bound to fail.

It is a positive development that discussion of anti-Semitism has increased, but it is also important to warn against an alarmist approach. For example, in relation to the physical defence of the Jewish community, the British record has been good for many years. Jewish community centres, schools and synagogues have all been protected. While violent attacks on individual Jews do still sometimes happen, they remain mercifully rare.

But the question of how to tackle anti-Semitic speech and images presents us with different challenges. It is unfortunate that the overwhelming tendency is to ban. For example, there is a lot of emphasis on trying to curtail expressions of anti-Semitism on social media. The recent Queen's Speech included a proposal aimed at curbing the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Others seeking to fight anti-Semitism have turned to imposing a particular definition of anti-Semitism on different institutions

including governments and universities - like that favoured by the International Holocaust Memorial Alliance. [xvi] Even those who are keen to call out the slippery distinctions between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism understand that enforcing such definitions can have a chilling effect on debate.

The problem with this censorious approach is that driving anti-Semitism underground leaves it to fester. Banning anti-Semitism paradoxically undermines the struggle to fight it, as it means it cannot be challenged in the open. If anything, such actions serve to reinforce the false perception of Jews as operating a powerful conspiracy to the detriment of the rest of society. It also makes it more difficult to distinguish between genuine critics of Israel and covert anti-Semites.

Contemporary anti-Semitism is complicated, and we must have a multi-layered understanding of its origins and expressions. And while anti-Semitism fortunately remains a minority trend in British society, a future of freedom from anti-Semitism and the hatred of Jews can only be achieved through a commitment to free and open debate. It may be difficult to stomach, but fighting it effectively means challenging it in the open, rather than forcing it to hide in the shadows.

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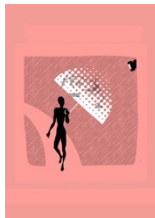
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