



## Anti-semitism and Palestine

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A few years ago, I taught a course on the Israel-Palestine conflict at a Catholic university in the United States. In an informal conversation with some colleagues, I shared my strong disapproval of the political options of the Israeli government, my ongoing opposition to the strategies of the Israeli army and my resounding critique of the ideology of political Zionism. During a lull in the conversation, an urbane professor of English literature, turned to me and with an anguished voice commented, "It is indeed terrible what those Jews are doing!" I was taken aback as I had not used the word Jew in any of my comments about Israeli civil and military leadership and Zionist political ideology. However, what took my breath away was what followed. Gently he added, "But what really gets to me is the lies the Jews spread about the Germans... a more civilized nation has never graced the planet." My criticism of Israeli leadership and Zionist ideology had encouraged this urbane academic to share with me his theories of Holocaust denial and Jewish conspiracy.

Sadly, anti-Semitism remains a reality today. Indeed, there are Jews who still face slurs against their identity, discrimination, injustice and even violence because they are Jews. This cannot be denied. And in the wake of the catastrophic ongoing war between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza, anti-Semitism seems to have again peaked. However, today the rise in anti-Semitism is also tied to the policies of a right-wing Israeli government that claims to be speaking for all Jews, and supposedly in their name, wages a ruthless war against the Palestinians. It needs to be stated at the outset loud and clear that the just struggle for an end to the war in Gaza, as well as an end to occupation and discrimination in Israel/Palestine, is not by definition anti-Semitic. Nor should there be a struggle between fighting for the liberation of the Palestinian people and the struggle to root out anti-Semitism wherever it raises its ugly head. In fact, the struggle against anti-Semitism and the struggle for the freedom and equality, rights and dignity of Palestinians should be seen as part of one and the same struggle for a world free of injustice, racism and violence of any kind.

### Anti-Semitism: a catastrophe for Jews

Anti-Judaism was transmitted for centuries within widespread traditional Christian discourse. Jews were defined as those who had killed God when they crucified Jesus Christ and as blind as they continued to deny that he was the Son of God and Savior of humanity. Jews were too often discriminated against and marginalized, victimized and persecuted, murdered and expelled over the centuries because of a teaching of contempt that promoted hostility to Jews and Judaism. Jews who sought to escape anti-Judaism in the Christian world could of course accept "the truth" and on becoming Christians they were for the most part assimilated into the Christian community, although even that was not guaranteed after the Inquisition at the end of the 15th century.

Anti-Judaism mutated into anti-Semitism at the dawn of modernity and gathered impetus in the second half of the nineteenth century. Exclusion, discrimination, outbursts of violence and finally precision organized genocide directed against Jews in various places in Europe and beyond were

no longer based upon theological tropes but rather on secular ethnocentric rhetoric that framed Jews as the perpetual outsiders, essentially treasonous, unable and unwilling to integrate and ominously hostile. From being racially, genetically or biologically Jewish, there was no escape in conversion. From the end of the nineteenth century and through the first half of the twentieth century millions of Jews were murdered and millions more uprooted as anti-Semitism materialized into state policies, bureaucratized brutality and meticulously planned genocide. The pathological impulses of ethnocentric nationalism and racist populism brought a cataclysmic end to much of the variegated Jewish cultures that had enriched the European continent for more than two millennia.

Jews who had clung to their multiple European homelands over centuries, hoping for full integration as equal citizens in the wake of the civil emancipation heralded by the 1789 French Revolution, too often found themselves forced to choose between death and exile. This reached its peak during the Second World War when millions of Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators in Europe, entire communities were obliterated and the center of the remnant Jewish world relocated to Palestine, the United States of America and other parts of the New World.

One of the ideologies that emerged within this travail towards the end of the nineteenth century in Europe was Zionism. It proposed a solution to the so-called "Jewish problem". Seeking its roots in the Jewish tradition, most particularly in the Bible, it formulated a nationalism in the image and likeness of the European nationalisms that were developing in that period. It argued that the Jews were a nation like any other modern nation, whose homeland was Palestine. The vision was to create a "Jewish state" there and the founder of political Zionism, the Jewish Austro-Hungarian Theodor Herzl, published a manifesto with exactly that title "*The Jewish State*" in 1896. A year later he convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland.

Modern Jewish migration to Palestine began in the aftermath of the anti-Semitic pogroms in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 1880s. Some Jewish migrants to Palestine began to lay an increasingly exclusive claim to Palestine from the beginning of the twentieth century. Many sought to replace Palestinian Arabs there rather than integrate into the overwhelmingly Arabic-speaking society of the country, composed of a majority of Muslims as well as Jews, Christians and others. The trickle, then flow and finally, mass migration of Jews to Palestine in the wake of the genocidal policies of the Nazis were aided and abetted by some Europeans who sympathized with Jews in their suffering. Many Christian sympathizers were also inspired by their fundamentalist reading of Biblical texts and their contempt for indigenous populations.

Whereas religious Jews had always maintained a memory and a spiritual tie to the land of Israel, political Zionism sought to ride the wave of European colonialism. This was particularly effective when the British conquered Palestine in 1917 after having promised the Jews "a homeland" as was inscribed in the Balfour Declaration, issued a few weeks before they grabbed Palestine from the Turks. From 1917 until 1948, under the British Mandate for Palestine, the Zionists worked tirelessly to establish not only a growing Jewish presence but also the trappings of state institutions under cover of British rule. The Jewish population mushroomed, from barely 10% in 1917 to over 30% in 1947, when the United Nations in the wake of the Shoah decided on the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. Despite the Jews still being a minority in the land, partition gave 56% of the land to the Jews and 44% to the Arabs, who rejected this decision to chop up their homeland.

In the wake of the 1948 War, following the establishment of the State of Israel and consequent genesis of a Palestinian refugee reality, Israel was recognized as sovereign in 78% of the territory of Mandatory Palestine. The remaining 22% of the territory was swallowed up by Jordan (the West Bank including East Jerusalem) and Egypt (the Gaza Strip). These territories were militarily occupied by Israel in the wake of the war in 1967. Today, in Israel there are seven million Jewish Israelis and two million Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship. In the Palestinian Territories, which since 1994 have been partially administered by the so-called Palestinian Authority, there are

five million Palestinian Arabs. Just over two million of them (70% refugees) live in the Gaza Strip from which Israel withdrew unilaterally in 2005. In the territories that make up Israel/Palestine today, there are seven million Jews and seven million Palestinians.

## Anti-semitism: a catastrophe for Palestinians

The catastrophe for the Jews of Europe during the Shoah became a Palestinian catastrophe too in the twentieth century. The Shoah is an indelible historical stain on the history of humanity. However, the Shoah and the Nakbah, the term used to speak of the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948, are undeniably linked together in history. Just as the Shoah is definitive for the identity of most Jews, the Nakbah is seared into the memory of Palestinians, a memory of how they were uprooted and driven out of their homeland, many of their towns and villages erased and a large part of the population becoming refugees in 1948. The Nakbah remains a reality for Palestinians in refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria as well as for those remaining in their homes but living under military occupation (in the Palestinian Territories) and systemic discrimination as second-class citizens (in Israel). Many insist that the Shoah is incomparable to any other human tragedy and no comparison is intended here. However, it was the horrific events of the Shoah that convinced many that the Jews indeed needed a land and a state of their own. In engineering the realization of these goals in Palestine, the Nakbah was set in motion. Was this necessarily so? The speculative academic debate that seeks to answer this query does not however change the reality that devolved from those events – the establishment of a state defined as Jewish and the consequent relegation of Palestinians to the margins of history.

Jewish and Christian Zionists who promoted Jewish migration to Palestine and cultivated Jewish political aspirations there, acted on their convictions within the context of the European colonialist enterprise, the building of empires in Asia and Africa. British 19th century politician Lord Shaftesbury phrased the agenda for Palestine as “*a land without a people for a people without a land*”. Nobly troubled by Jewish suffering in Eastern Europe, he was remarkably uninterested in the fate of the people that lived in Palestine, an indigenous people in a soon to be colonized territory, just one more non-European people overlooked as if it did not exist. Lord Arthur Balfour shared his sympathies for Jewish suffering and his ignorance of the Palestinian people, and the 1917 declaration that bore his name changed the course of history in Palestine. Whereas the Shoah was brought to an end by the victory of the Allies and the destruction of Nazi rule, the Nakbah has had no resolution as of yet and the life of Palestinians persists in its shadow: exile, occupation and discrimination.

Unfortunately, anti-Semitism has also found a home within the Palestinian, Arab and wider Muslim world. The Prophet Muhammad’s conflicts with Jewish tribes in the seventh century are echoed in Quranic texts that have been brandished in the conflict at the heart of the Middle East in recent decades. European anti-Semitic tropes have blended with these verses, ripped out of context, and have been applied to Jews wherever they are in the name of the war on Israel and Zionism. Radical Zionist anti-Arab racism and extremist Arab anti-Semitism promote a stereotypical discourse that knows no compromise, no dialogue and leads only to more violence, destruction and death.

## Defining anti-Semitism today

Whereas the ongoing fight against anti-Semitism is a necessary part of the wider struggle against all forms of racism and xenophobia, some have developed definitions of anti-Semitism that delegitimize the struggle for justice and peace in Palestine. Cynical political use of anti-Semitism has been made in order to silence Palestinians and their supporters, accusing critics of Zionist ideology and the leadership of Israel of engaging in anti-Semitism.

In this context, it is interesting to remember that the sole voice in the British cabinet in 1917 that opposed the Balfour Declaration was that of the Jewish English Secretary for India, Lord Edwin Montagu. Among the reasons for his opposition was his sentiment that proposing that the Jews migrate to a far-distant “homeland”, would appeal to anti-Semites, who could thus dispose of their Jewish neighbors. Today, this conjunction between anti-Semitism and Zionism is striking when extreme right-wing populist parties, whose rhetoric is xenophobic and racist, often smacking of anti-Semitism, like the National Front in France or similar parties in Austria, Belgium and elsewhere, strongly support the State of Israel, support which is cultivated by extremist Israeli politicians. Their “Zionist” sympathies are woven together with their racism against Arabs and Muslims. Certain Evangelical Christian Zionists, particularly in the United States, also weave together a discourse, supposedly based on the Bible, that is traditionally anti-Jewish, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab but solidly pro-Israeli and supportive of the war against Palestinians.

Needless to say, there might indeed be some who, while defending the rights of Palestinians, might be prone to anti-Semitic discourse or action. However, criticizing Zionist ideology, the politics and practices of the State of Israel, its military or state organisms and acting against them do not constitute anti-Semitism per se. There is a fine but clear line to be drawn here to prevent legitimate criticism from becoming racist diatribe but the line must be drawn. A number of recent definitions try to do this with greater or lesser finesse. However, ultimately this can only be done coherently and with moral integrity when the struggle against all forms of racism, injustice and human rights abuses includes an awareness of both the pernicious traces of continuing anti-Semitism and the myriad forms of anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab sentiment, Islamophobia and the brutal whitewashing of occupation and discrimination in Israel-Palestine today. Ultimately, those fighting anti-Semitism, those defending the rights of Palestinians and those promoting a vision of a society in Israel/Palestine based upon justice, peace, freedom and equality should be allies in building a better world and not foes of one another.

Source: [Vatican News](#), 08 May 2024.