

Israel's 'new anti-Semitism'

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Global Research, September 23, 2006

23 September 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

NAZARETH, 22 September 2006. The trajectory of a long-running campaign that gave birth this month to the preposterous all-party British parliamentary report into anti-Semitism in the UK can be traced back to intensive lobbying by the Israeli government that began more than four years ago, in early 2002.

At that time, as Ariel Sharon was shredding the tattered remains of the Oslo accords by reinvading West Bank towns handed over to the Palestinian Authority in his destructive rampage known as Operation Defensive Shield, he drafted the Israeli media into the fray. Local newspapers began endlessly highlighting concerns about the rise of a "new anti-Semitism", a theme that was rapidly and enthusiastically taken up by the muscular Zionist lobby in the US.

It was not the first time, of course, that Israel had called on American loyalists to help it out of trouble. In *Beyond Chutzpah*, Norman Finkelstein documents the advent of claims about a new anti-Semitism to Israel's lacklustre performance in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. On that occasion, it was hoped, the charge of anti-Semitism could be deployed against critics to reduce pressure on Israel to return Sinai to Egypt and negotiate with the Palestinians.

Israel alerted the world to another wave of anti-Semitism in the early 1980s, just as it came under unprecedented criticism for its invasion and occupation of Lebanon. What distinguished the new anti-Semitism from traditional anti-Jewish racism of the kind that led to Germany's death camps, said its promoters, was that this time it embraced the progressive left rather than the far right.

The latest claims about anti-Semitism began life in the spring of 2002, with the English-language website of Israel's respected liberal daily newspaper, Haaretz, flagging for many months a special online supplement of articles on the "New anti-Semitism", warning that the "age-old hatred" was being revived in Europe and America. The refrain was soon taken up the Jerusalem Post, a rightwing English-language newspaper regularly used by the Israeli establishment to shore up support for its policies among Diaspora Jews.

Like its precursors, argued Israel's apologists, the latest wave of anti-Semitism was the responsibility of progressive Western movements — though with a fresh twist. An ever-present but largely latent Western anti-Semitism was being stoked into frenzy by the growing political and intellectual influence of extremist Muslim immigrants. The implication was that an unholy alliance had been spawned between the left and militant Islam.

Such views were first aired by senior members of Sharon's cabinet. In an interview in the Jerusalem Post in November 2002, for example, Binyamin Netanyahu warned that latent anti-Semitism was again becoming active:

“In my view, there are many in Europe who oppose anti-Semitism, and many governments and leaders who oppose anti-Semitism, but the strain exists there. It is ignoring reality to say that it is not present. It has now been wedded to and stimulated by the more potent and more overt force of anti-Semitism, which is Islamic anti-Semitism coming from some of the Islamic minorities in European countries. This is often disguised as anti-Zionism.”

Netanyahu proposed “lancing the boil” by beginning an aggressive public relations campaign of “self-defence”. A month later Israel’s president, Moshe Katsav, picked on the softest target of all, warning during a state visit that the fight against anti-Semitism must begin in Germany, where “voices of anti-Semitism can be heard”.

But, as ever, the main target of the new anti-Semitism campaign were audiences in the US, Israel’s generous patron. There, members of the Israel lobby were turning into a chorus of doom.

In the early stages of the campaign, the lobby’s real motivation was not concealed: it wanted to smother a fledgling debate by American civil society, particularly the churches and universities, to divest — withdraw their substantial investments — from Israel in response to Operation Defensive Shield.

In October 2002, after Israel had effectively reoccupied the West Bank, the ever-reliable Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, lumped in critics who were calling for divestment from Israel with the new anti-Semites. He urged a new body established by the Israeli government called the Forum for Co-ordinating the Struggle against anti-Semitism to articulate clearly “what we know in our hearts and guts: when that line [to anti-Semitism] is crossed”.

A fortnight later Foxman had got into his stride, warning that Jews were more vulnerable than at any time since the Second World War. “I did not believe in my lifetime that I or we would be preoccupied on the level that we are, or [face] the intensity of anti-Semitism that we are experiencing,” he told the Jerusalem Post.

Echoing Netanyahu’s warning, Foxman added that the rapid spread of the new anti-Semitism had been made possible by the communications revolution, mainly the internet, which was allowing Muslims to relay their hate messages across the world within seconds, infecting people around the globe.

It is now clear that Israel and its loyalists had three main goals in mind as they began their campaign. Two were familiar motives from previous attempts at highlighting a “new anti-Semitism”. The third was new.

The first aim, and possibly the best understood, was to stifle all criticism of Israel, particularly in the US. During the course of 2003 it became increasingly apparent to journalists like myself that the American media, and soon much of the European media, was growing shy of printing even the mild criticism of Israel it usually allowed. By the time Israel began stepping up the pace of construction of its monstrous wall across the West Bank in spring 2003, editors were reluctant to touch the story.

As the fourth estate fell silent, so did many of the progressive voices in our universities and churches. Divestment was entirely removed from the agenda. McCarthyite organisations like CampusWatch helped enforce the reign of intimidation. Academics who stood their ground,

like Columbia University's Joseph Massad, attracted the vindictive attention of new activist groups like the David Project.

A second, less noticed, goal was an urgent desire to prevent any slippage in the numbers of Jews inside Israel that might benefit the Palestinians as the two ethnic groups approached demographic parity in the area known to Israelis as Greater Israel and to Palestinians as historic Palestine.

Demography had been a long-standing obsession of the Zionist movement: during the 1948 war, the Israeli army terrorised away or forcibly removed some 80 per cent of the Palestinians living inside the borders of what became Israel to guarantee its new status as a Jewish state.

But by the turn of the millennium, following Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, and the rapid growth of the oppressed Palestinian populations both in the occupied territories and inside Israel, demography had been pushed to the top of Israel's policy agenda again.

During the second intifada, as the Palestinians fought back against Israel's war machine with a wave of suicide bombs on buses in major Israeli cities, Sharon's government feared that well-off Israeli Jews might start to regard Europe and America as a safer bet than Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. The danger was that the demographic battle might be lost as Israeli Jews emigrated.

By suggesting that Europe in particular had become a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism, it was hoped that Israeli Jews, many of whom have more than one passport, would be afraid to leave. A survey by the Jewish Agency taken as early as May 2002 showed, for example, that 84 per cent of Israelis believed anti-Semitism had again become a serious threat to world Jewry.

At the same time Israeli politicians concentrated their attention on the two European countries with the largest Jewish populations, Britain and France, both of which also have significant numbers of immigrant Muslims. They highlighted a supposed rise in anti-Semitism in these two countries in the hope of attracting their Jewish populations to Israel.

In France, for example, peculiar anti-Semitic attacks were given plenty of media coverage: from a senior rabbi who was stabbed (by himself, as it later turned out) to a young Jewish woman attacked on a train by anti-Semitic thugs (except, as it later emerged, she was not Jewish).

Sharon took advantage of the manufactured climate of fear in July 2004 to claim that France was in the grip of "the wildest anti-Semitism", urging French Jews to come to Israel.

The third goal, however, had not been seen before. It tied the rise of a new anti-Semitism with the increase of Islamic fundamentalism in the West, implying that Muslim extremists were asserting an ideological control over Western thinking. It chimed well with the post 9-11 atmosphere.

In this spirit, American Jewish academics like David Goldhagen characterised anti-Semitism as constantly "evolving". In a piece entitled "The Globalisation of anti-Semitism" published in the American Jewish weekly *Forward* in May 2003, Goldhagen argued that Europe had exported its classical racist anti-Semitism to the Arab world, which in turn was re-infecting

the West.

“Then the Arab countries re-exported the new hybrid demonology back to Europe and, using the United Nations and other international institutions, to other countries around the world. In Germany, France, Great Britain and elsewhere, today’s intensive anti-Semitic _expression and agitation uses old tropes once applied to local Jews — charges of sowing disorder, wanting to subjugate others — with new content overwhelmingly directed at Jews outside their countries.”

This theory of a “free-floating” contagion of hatred towards Jews, being spread by Arabs and their sympathisers through the internet, media and international bodies, found many admirers. The British neo-conservative journalist Melanie Philips claimed popularly, if ludicrously, that British identity was being subverted and pushed out by an Islamic identity that was turning her country into a capital of terror, “Londonistan”.

This final goal of the proponents of “the new anti-Semitism” was so successful because it could be easily conflated with other ideas associated with America’s war on terror, such as the clash of civilisations. If it was “us” versus “them”, then the new anti-Semitism posited from the outset that the Jews were on the side of the angels. It fell to the Christian West to decide whether to make a pact with good (Judaism, Israel, civilisation) or evil (Islam, Osama bin Laden, Londonistan).

We are far from reaching the end of this treacherous road, both because the White House is bankrupt of policy initiatives apart from its war on terror, and because Israel’s place is for the moment assured at the heart of the US administration’s neoconservative agenda.

That was made clear last week when Netanyahu, the most popular politician in Israel, added yet another layer of lethal mischief to the neoconservative spin machine as it gears up to confront Iran over its nuclear ambitions. Netanyahu compared Iran and its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to Adolf Hitler.

“Hitler went out on a world campaign first, and then tried to get nuclear weapons. Iran is trying to get nuclear arms first. Therefore from that perspective, it is much more dangerous,” Netanyahu told Israel’s anti-terrorism policymakers.

Netanyahu’s implication was transparent: Iran is looking for another Final Solution, this one targeting Israel as well as world Jewry. The moment of reckoning is near at hand, according to Tzipi Livni, Israel’s foreign minister, who claims against all the evidence that Iran is only months away from possessing nuclear weapons.

“International terrorism is a mistaken term,” Netanyahu added, “not because it doesn’t exist, but because the problem is international militant Islam. That is the movement ... that operates terror on the international level, and that is the movement that is preparing the ultimate terror, nuclear terrorism.”

Faced with the evil designs of the “Islamic fascists”, such as those in Iran, Israel’s nuclear arsenal — and the nuclear Holocaust Israel can and appears prepared to unleash — may be presented as the civilised world’s salvation.

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