

Netanyahu and Europe's Far Right Find Common Ground

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Israel has been having its own internal debate about the significance of the Paris killings this month, with concerns quite separate from those being expressed in Europe.

While Europeans are mired in debates about free speech and the role of Islam in secular societies, Israelis generally – and their prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in particular – view the attacks as confirming Israel's place as the only safe haven for Jews around the world.

The 17 deaths in Paris have reinforced Israeli suspicions that Europe, with its rapidly growing Muslim population, is being dragged into a clash of civilisations that it is ill-equipped to combat. More specifically, the targeting of a kosher supermarket that killed four Jews has heightened a belief that Jews outside Israel are in mortal danger.

If surveys are to be believed, such anxieties are shared in Europe's Jewish communities. One published last week found that 56 per cent of British Jews think anti-semitism in Britain now is comparable to the 1930s.

As one calmer Israeli analyst pointed out, the findings suggested “a disconnect from reality which borders on hysteria”.

Such fears have been stoked by images like the one posted on Facebook last week by the Israeli embassy in Dublin, showing the Mona Lisa wearing a hijab and carrying a large rocket. The line underneath read: “Israel is the last frontier of the free world.”

In similar vein, the Arab affairs correspondent on Israel's Channel 10 broadcast a fear-mongering “investigation” from London supposedly proving that the city was overrun with jihadis.

The hysteria is echoed by Israeli politicians, not least Mr Netanyahu. Since the Paris attacks, he has repeated warnings of a “poisonous” Islam conquering the West – ignoring the reality that Europe, including France, is far safer for Jews than Israel has proved.

Politicians on both the left and right have parroted his message that European Jews know “in their hearts that they have only one country”. Israel apparently persuaded the families of the four Jewish victims of that: they were flown to Israel to be buried in Jerusalem.

In contrast, the burial in Paris of Ahmed Merabet, the Muslim policeman also killed by the gunmen, sent a message of French unity, noted a French Jewish leader. This was the

moment, he added, for his community to say: “We will be buried here, just like everyone else. We are French and we have not given up.”

Mr Netanyahu has other ideas. At a time when the number of Jewish migrants from France is already rocketing, he has established a ministerial committee to find ways to induce yet more to come to Israel.

It was widely reported in Israel that the French president, Francois Hollande, had appealed to Mr Netanyahu not to participate in the solidarity rally in Paris a week ago, fearful that he would use the occasion to exacerbate tensions in France. Mr Netanyahu ignored the request.

He had good reason to want to be there, not least to grandstand with world leaders during Israel’s election campaign. In addition, proselytising for his claim that the so-called Judeo-Christian West is on a collision course with Islam usefully places him on the side of the angels as he tries to build a Greater Israel, crushing Palestinian ambitions for statehood.

But it would be wrong to view Mr Netanyahu’s argument as solely opportunistic. It is underpinned by an authentic worldview, even if one with paradoxical antecedents.

His approach is embodied in recent efforts – delayed because of the election – to pass a basic law defining Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. That would crown Mr Netanyahu leader of Jews worldwide rather than of Israeli citizens, a fifth of whom are Palestinian.

Such a conception of citizenship and nationhood is based on ethnicity, not territory. It opposes multiculturalism, believing instead that loyalty to the state derives from a tribal attachment rather than a civic one. It stands in stark opposition to most European countries’ notions of citizenship.

As a result, the Israeli leadership assumes that all Palestinians, including those who are Israeli citizens, cannot be trusted and that there can never be real peace in the region. That is why Israel has been building iron walls everywhere to create a fortress Jewish state.

But the logical corollary is that Jews too cannot be loyal to the other states they live in, such as France. In Mr conception, a Jew’s primary bond should be to their “true home”: the Jewish state of Israel.

Paradoxically, that view is shared by Europe’s far-right, including groups like France’s National Front, whose popularity has been growing on the back of attacks like the one in Paris. They argue that minorities are inherently suspect and that Europe is better off without them.

In this regard, Mr Netanyahu and the far-right share much common ground. He wants a Europe free of Jews – as well as Muslims who undermine Europe’s support for Israel – because he thinks that is in Jewish interests. The far-right wants the same because it believes it will be in the interests of a supposed “native” white majority.

One Israeli commentator noted pointedly that Israeli politicians like Mr Netanyahu were helping to “finish the job started by the Nazis and their Vichy collaborators: making France Judenrein”.

In calling for Jews to flee after the Paris attacks, Mr Netanyahu is bolstering the dangerous arguments of Europe's far-right.

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