

Prime Minister Trudeau does not Conflate Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism

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Earlier this month, Israel and its friends around the world celebrated the 69th anniversary of Israel's unilateral declaration of independence. Among them was our Prime Minister who issued the following statement: "while we celebrate Israel's independence, we also reaffirm our commitment to fight anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism." The fact that anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism were mentioned separately is significant because they are very different phenomena, which many mistakenly conflate. Such a conflation would be historically incorrect and politically dangerous.

Anti-Semitism, like all racial hatred, is prohibited in Canada. Originally, anti-Semitism was as a reaction to social, cultural and economic integration of Jews in the wake of the Emancipation. It then spread around the world, including Canada. Jews used to be routinely discriminated against in many spheres of public life. In Germany, anti-Semitism produced an ideology that ended in the systematic murder of millions of Jewish civilians during the Second World War.

Another consequence of anti-Semitism was the emergence, in the late 19th century, of Jewish nationalism, a political movement known as Zionism. It aimed at forging out of the Jews a nation in the European sense of the word, getting these "nationalized Jews" to settle in Palestine and ensuring the Zionists' political and military control over the country, which was inhabited by diverse ethnic and confessional groups.

Zionism was a revolution in Jewish life, and its founders were proud of it. To quote Shlomo Avineri, a prominent political scientist and historian who also served as Director General of Israel's Foreign Office,

"Zionism was the most fundamental revolution in Jewish life. It substituted a secular self-identity of the Jews as a nation for the traditional and Orthodox self-identity in religious terms."

In his words, Zionism was

"a clear break with the quietism of the religious belief in messianic redemption that should occur only through divine intercession in the mundane cycles of world history."

Avineri also believes that it would be "banal, conformist and apologetic" to link Zionism to the traditional Jewish longing for the Land of Israel.

No wonder Zionism provoked massive opposition among the world's Jewish population. However surprising this may seem today, many Jews accused Zionists of anti-Semitism. Edwin Montague, a prominent British statesman and a Jew, vigorously protested the Balfour declaration that promised in 1917 to support the Zionist project in Palestine. He titled his public rebuke "Memorandum on the anti-Semitism of the Present government." In fact, Balfour himself severely limited the immigration of Jews fleeing pogroms in the Russian Empire in 1905 while favouring their settlement in Palestine.



Indeed, Zionists argued – and continue to argue – that Jews constitute an alien body within non-Jewish nations, and that they really belong to Israel. This is precisely what anti-Semites believed, and what many continue to believe. This confluence of ideas and interests did not escape the intrepid founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl (image on the right). In his diary, Herzl acknowledged that the anti-Semites would be instrumental in helping carry out the Zionist program.

History proved Herzl right. The Zionist movement found grace in the eyes of anti-Semites during over one century of its history. Not only did they believe that Jews constitute a foreign element in their countries, they also wanted them out. This is how Zionist training camps were allowed to operate between the world wars in several countries of Europe, including Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, which also facilitated the transfer of thousands of German Jews and their capital to Palestine.

It is now clear that conflating anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism is historically incorrect. It is also politically dangerous to confuse the two, since legitimate opposition to Jewish nationalism may be branded anti-Semitic. This would go against Canada's commitment to free expression by lumping criticism, boycott, sanctions and other forms of peaceful protest with anti-Jewish bigotry. As any Canadian, Prime Minister Trudeau is free to support or oppose Zionism. And as the highest elected official in the country, he deserves credit for distinguishing between political opinion and racial hatred.

The author is professor of history at the Université de Montréal. His recent book is What is Modern Israel? (University of Chicago Press, 2016). His previous book A Threat from within: a Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism has been translated into over a dozen of languages and shortlisted for the Governor General Award.

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