The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Anti-Semitism in France: a Link and Its Implications

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Abstract

Evaluating the repercussions of conflating criticism of Israeli politics and Anti-Semitism as well as the historic salience of the conflict for French inter-religious tensions, we find that a domestic strategy to address anti-Semitism in France must tackle all forms of racism and unequal treatment, but cannot be fully realized without a change in Israeli politics towards Palestine and in the tactics of Jewish advocacy groups. By taking a strong stance in favor of Israeli-Palestinian peace in such a way that emphasizes the respect of both religious tolerance and human rights, the French can tackle violence and racism domestically, and act in the interest of world Jewry while aiding towards a more permanent resolution of Israeli-Palestinian relations on the world stage.
Anti-Semitism is alive and well in France: just this past week Jean-Marie Le Pen, the ex-leader of the French far right Front National party has once again stated that the Holocaust was a “detail” of history in the far right weekly Rivarol. Rabbis recommend for Jews to take off their yarmulkes when walking in certain Parisian neighborhoods, and Jewish graves have several times been desecrated in various parts of France. But anti-Semitism today is different from that of the past, and rhetoric on all sides often associates a given stance regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a targeted opinion of all Israelis and Jews alike. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli politics in general fuel tensions in the French population, and addressing anti-Semitism in France requires a domestic strategy to honestly tackle all forms of racism and unequal treatment. Such a strategy, however, cannot be fully realized without a change in Israeli politics towards Palestine, and in the tactics of Jewish advocacy groups. This paper argues that acting in the interest of world Jewry today stands in opposition to the status-quo pursuit of Israeli state goals that are promoted as representative of the Jewish nation as a whole. We will first explore the origins and manifestations of the post Second World War anti-Semitism in France and the correlation with events in the Middle East and Israel. We will then define the concept of “new anti-Semitism,” address the repercussions of equating opposition to Israeli politics to Anti-Semitism, and evaluate the solutions that would best ensure the interest of French religious coexistence, Middle Eastern peace and world Jewry.

The issue of recent anti-Semitism in France, and French attitudes towards Israeli politics and the Israeli occupation stirs passions on all sides of the argument, making it difficult to establish any objectives truths or understandings. Opinions, activism, generalizations, and strong skepticism of opposing viewpoints often drive academia on the topic. The contentions begin when attempting to determine whether this is a distinct, recent phenomenon or simply a continued manifestation of an eternal hatred, whether anti-Semitism is truly on the rise, what causes the attitude, and even what can be measured as a manifestation of anti-Semitism. There are different accounts to describe the post-World War Two landscape of societal tensions in France, and one author whose works have been more widely accepted as academic and relatively neutral are those of the French sociologist Michel Wieviorka, author of Hatred of Jews in Present Day France. Wieviorka explains that in the years following the war, anti-Semitism could no longer be held as an opinion, and as the oppressive political instauration of anti-Semitism had disappeared Jews felt safer in France. This new French model worked well during the 1960s and ’70s: the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 was not received negatively in France, and the image of the Jewish state remained positive even throughout the 1967 Six Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The Jewish population at this time remained relatively small, and it fit in the “Republican” model very dear to laïc France as Jews blended in as typical citizens in society, practicing their religion mostly in the private sphere. The decolonization of North Africa ushered in a new dynamic, and the demographics were significantly altered as many Jews as well as Arab Muslims arrived from the former French colonies. As historian Maud Mandel argues in her book Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict, many of the immigrant workers who had been brought to France from the colonies chose to emigrate permanently and to reunite their families there, and the Arab population also grew from new immigrant families fleeing the domestic tensions, most significantly in Algeria. But the Algerian Muslims who settled in France at the same time as the Algerian Jews were not given French citizenship at first, and although both Jews and Muslims settled in the same neighborhoods, a rift began to form as a consequence of their unequal education levels (Jews often having received a more extensive education in the colonies). Because of the fact that unlike Jews, Muslims were not directly awarded French citizenship and Jews were better supported in general by the French government, they were consequently better able to integrate French society. The North African immigration also caused a shift within the attitude of the French Jewish community as North African Jews were accustomed to life as a separate community in the colonies, and the Jewish population became more visible and distinct in French cities as members built their own schools and synagogues and created cultural institutions, leading Jewishness to exist as a particular identity in the French public space.

The link to Israel-Palestine became salient in the 1980s. Jews grew more outspoken of an attachment to Israel, which occurred simultaneously with a degradation of the image of Israel in France around the time of the 1982 Lebanon war. In her distinct pro-Israeli stance, Maud Mandel argues that the efforts to promote pluriculturalism and to create coalitions between Jewish and Muslim youths in France were always unstable –Jews could separate the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians from the struggle for religious tolerance in France, whereas the Muslim groups could not. As tensions rose for the Jewish community, Jews were put in a difficult position as the French organization created to defend...
their interests and fight anti-Semitism, the Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives en France (Representative Council on Jewish Institutions in France, Crif) demanded of them an unconditional support of the Israeli government and advanced that combating anti-Semitism and defending Israel were one and the same fight. At the same time, anti-Semitism became more overt and was treated as less shocking by the French population, with specific targeting of Jewish shops and institutions by disenfranchised “banlieues” youth, and in other sectors of French society which support the far right Front National party as well individuals from the far left. The Israel lobby in France devised more formal strategies and increasingly linked criticism of Israel to anti-Semitism, while simultaneously a growing solidarity with the Palestinian people developed not only amongst Arab and Muslim populations but in the general landscape of French society, for instance with organized protests and activism promoted through art exhibitions.

The evaluation of current anti-Semitism is as contentious as its development. While some French political scientists like Pascal Boniface argue that anti-Semitism is not on the rise but that this perceived increase is only a result of media portrayal, many data surveys do report an increase in attacks against Jews, Jewish institutions and symbols of Judaism. The data collected by the French Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice is often judged as non-representative of the actual phenomenon since the numbers are based on the complaints filed, and many people who are victims of an anti-Semitic attack do not wish to file a complaint or are deterred by the complexities of the procedure. To remedy this lack of information, the French National Commission consulting on Human Rights (CNDH) publishes each year an annual survey on racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia in France which goes beyond penal infractions and also includes opinion polls. They conclude that the year 2014 saw an increase superior to 100% of anti-Semitic acts from the previous year, with a total sum of 851 facts recorded by the police compared to 423 in 2013. 2014 also saw an increase in the revival of old stereotypes against Jews, with a greater approval of statements like “Jews have too much power” or “Jews have a special attachment to money.” Using survey data, we may also conclude a factual correlation between manifestations of anti-Semitism in France and events in the Middle East. The number of recorded acts increased from 82 for the year 1999 to 744 for the year 2000 corresponding to the second intifada, from a total of 397 in 2008 to 832 recorded in 2009 corresponding with the December-January operation Cast Lead in the Gaza strip, and most recently with the Operation Protective Edge of July 2014 the number of acts and threats measured increased from 55 in June 2014 to 208 in July 2014. The impact of these incidents is notable: the climate in the French Jewish community grows increasingly fearful, and combined with economic pessimism, has led French Jews to emigrate to Israel in historically unprecedented numbers. France was the largest source of Jews moving to Israel last year according to the Jewish Agency for Israel which coordinates immigration to Israel, predicting that up to 15,000 would emigrate this year. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has publicly called for French Jews to come to Israel following the January Paris attacks, and insists that Jews in France will only face increased discrimination and should return to their Israeli homeland. As much as French politicians attempt to counter this by insisting that French Jews are French foremost and essential to the makeup of French society, some members of the Jewish community in France feel an Islamic threat to their security and an indifference of the French authorities, and although a significant part still do not consider leaving the country as a solution, the immigration of French Jews is expected to keep on increasing in the future.

Although France is often portrayed by international media as the European country where anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are most present and alarming, this seems to be a detrimental exaggeration as polls conducted by the PEW for example indicate that Jews are viewed favorably by 89% of the French population (the greatest percentage for all Western European states), while this number is at 82% for Germany, 65% for Italy and even down to 47% for Greece. Muslims are viewed favorably by 72% of the French population (again, the highest value for Western Europe), and this number decreases to 58% in Germany and 49% in Spain for instance. This impression of racism in France is largely due to media portrayal, and the fact that the particular link between anti-Semitism and Islamic radicalism is most salient in France as it is the state which houses both the largest Muslim and Jewish communities of Western Europe. The French response to anti-Semitism is largely viewed by Jews, Israelis or commentators sympathetic to the Israeli cause as insufficient, and is sometimes even considered cowardly in its reticence to address a threat perceived to originate from Islam, of denial toward the phenomenon, as exposing a clear bias in favor of Palestine and even as an additional manifestation of eternal abandonment of and discrimination against the Jewish community in France.

The New Anti-Semitism
New anti-Semitism is the concept that a new form of anti-Semitism has developed in the late 20th and 21st century emanating from the far right but most importantly from the far-left radical Islam. Proponents in France argue that although traditional Christian hatred of Jews has largely dissipated after the second world war, there is now a growing acceptance of racist bias against Jews coming from both mainstream French and most significantly from the French Muslim population, all of which use anti-Zionism and the criticism of Israel as a hidden face for
anti-Semitism (which is commonly defined as hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group). In an essay published in Those Who Forget the Past, the collection of works on the new Anti-Semitism, British journalist Barbara Amiel describes that this rise in anti-Semitism and America’s failed efforts to bring democracy to the Middle East are all caused by the rise of Islamism, and she states that post-9/11 people could no longer ignore that “the problem was not Israel’s intransigence, nor even the conflict that comes from Israel’s existence: the problem is Islamism.” Gabriel Schoenfeld argues that we should “for the moment bracket off the Muslim world” as “the evidence of anti-Jewish hatred in that immense pocket of humanity has been copiously documented and is simply too overwhelming to warrant extended discussion.” In his analysis of the European reaction to an Israeli incursion in the West Bank he states that European disapproval of an evidently defensive Israeli decision on the part of Shimon Peres was to be expected given Europe’s support of Palestinian statehood, but that the reaction was even more violent than that as seen in the documented attacks on “Jewish symbols, Jewish institutions and Jews themselves.” Thus the politics of the EU regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a political reaction to an Israeli incursion in the occupied territories are confounded with an attack on all Jewish people. These diplomatic reactions towards a state’s policies are put in the same category as independent anti-Semitic acts led by a handful of individuals chanting “Death to the Jews” at pro-Palestinian protests for instance, with these individual acts chosen to represent an anti-Semitic nature of solidarity towards Palestine, the Muslim population, and a European neglect of the security of Jews all at the same time. According to Melanie Philipps there is “no doubt” that “anti-Zionism is now being used to cloak a terrifying nexus between genocidal Arab and Islamist hatred of the Jews and deep-seated European prejudices,” and that this new anti-Semitism is “nothing to do with the settlements or the West Bank”, but that the language being used “exposes as a cruel delusion the common belief that the Middle East crisis would be solved by the creation of a Palestinian state.” The arguments used by proponents sometimes single out the economic inequalities and integration challenges of French Muslims as specific political or social conditions causing an animosity from the seemingly monolithic Muslim Arab community towards Jews, but most often arguments generalize phenomena linked to the Muslim community as characteristic of Islam only. This perception creates a sense of victimhood and abandonment within the French Jewish community.

A Dangerous Conflation

There exist links between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a contestation of the right of the Jewish state to exist, and anti-Semitic acts which directly target Jews solely for their identity as members of a Jewish nation. But the talk of a “new anti-Semitism” could be dangerous as those who argue that it is evidently on the rise are conflating two phenomena which are connected while remaining critically separate. Most French associations which promote Palestinian rights and self-determination and groups which criticize Israeli politics explicitly condemn anti-Semitism as racism and contrary to their principles of human rights and freedom. Nevertheless, some individuals linked to their advocacy tarnish manifestations and express views which reflect clear anti-Semitism. Certain members of the Jewish community, Israeli politicians, French and European politicians, and many French Muslims and Christians alike can all be blamed for the detrimental blending of anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and criticism of Israeli policies and politicians as one and the same cause. Wherever this conflation exists, it leads one individual to look at the next with a sense of “otherness” or opposition based on their religion or their political stance and creates an opposition which is not intrinsic but is socially learned. This phenomenon is deployed by many European Jews who face direct criticism when their Jewishness is equated to support for Sharon or Netanyahu’s policies. The peculiarity of the Zionism-Israeli-anti-Semitism mix-up is that it is promoted by many Israeli politicians and Jewish intellectuals. Finkelstein argues that when Netanyahu states that he represents all of the Jewish Nation before international public appearances, or when making strong anti-Arab comments, one cannot wonder that animosity and blame regarding Israeli acts be turned on the Jewish population as a whole. In the definition of the new anti-Semitism itself, although many authors quickly mention that one can be critical of Israel without necessarily being anti-Semitic, they come to define almost every instance of criticism as a disguised form of anti-Semitism. Several international onlookers cite this conflation as a tactic used by Israel to defend its policies and act in impunity. The conflation often emanates from the Israeli government and certain pro-Israeli activists, and spreads in Jewish communities worldwide, as in the case of the Crit’s unconditional support towards the state of Israel and its policies. Peter Beaumont argues that “while the phenomenon of anti-Jewish sentiment and attacks in some quarters of the Islamic community in Europe is to be deplored, so too must be the effort to co-opt it as an alibi for Israel’s behavior and to use it to silence opposition to its policies.”

French Anti-Semitism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role of French Politics

Both underestimation and overestimation of anti-Semitism are “social productions” which have detrimental consequences for all actors involved in the debate. Far from an attempt to minimize persecutions against Jews in France, it is important to note that the general stance in French politics is still one of very strong solidarity...
with the Jewish people which is expressed also as a reticence to criticize Israeli politics. Although the French population is divided in its stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, French politicians and intellectuals often steer clear of criticizing Israel due to the risk of being portrayed as anti-Semitic. Gideon Levy, the prominent Israeli human rights journalist notes the silencing of opinions in France as, for instance, a segment of his interview for a French broadcast in which he stated at times being ashamed of being an Israeli was cut out due to the channel’s fear of reprimand. Attitudes are more positive towards the Jewish community than towards the Muslim one, and anti-Semitic incidents are often treated with more concern than manifestations of Islamophobia. As Michel Wieviorka concludes in his sociological analysis of Anti-Semitism in France, “the racism to which the immigrant descent populations in France are subjected is transmitted in ways that are far more numerous and diversified than the racism which targets the Jews” including discrimination in the workplace, inequalities, and exclusion leading to segregation in ghettos.

The best policy for France to pursue in order to combat anti-Semitism is to combat racism in all its forms, targeting both the normalization of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic speech and addressing double standards when dealing with religious discrimination domestically and the racism faced by populations of immigrant descent. As defended by Wieviorka, “anti-Semitism should decline if an active and voluntarist form of political management at both local and national level were to replace, on the one hand, the process of ghettoization, racial and social discrimination and on the other, the non-recognition of the past and the historical roots of populations of immigrant descent.” While the anti-Semitic attacks blended into Palestinian or Arab advocacy need to be treated as clear and distinct manifestations of racism, this should be applied to the many forms of Islamophobic racism sometimes blended into pro-Israeli rhetoric, as for example seen in the previously quoted works describing the “new anti-Semitism.” Treating all individuals on an equal footing as citizens of France and denouncing injustice would eliminate concurrent victimization and leave less political space for injustice.

We may conclude that in order to adequately tackle anti-Semitism and societal tensions in France and elsewhere, “the Jewish community worldwide must be honest too about what is really being done in Israel, ostensibly in its name.” A goal for progress today is to encourage a public debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and domestic tensions between Muslims and Jews in an open and free manner without defamation and violence. The phenomena observed in France are “global” and “feed on transnational and world events,” and although France’s influence might be limited, a start towards progress would be to “resolutely adopt a stance in favor of peace between Israelis and Palestinians.” The status quo of Israel’s politics towards the West Bank and Gaza, the rhetoric of leaders generalizing Islam with terrorism, and the fact that leaders and organizations often claim that their stance reflects that of all Israelis or even Jews more broadly might serve the Israeli government’s short-term interests but do not appear to serve those of world Jewry. Several contested Jewish intellectuals and international onlookers suggest that this attempt to inherently tie anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel’s policies must be denounced, and that international criticism of Israel is in fact essential due to the unsustainability of the current situation in the region. Gideon Levy asserts in his many public appearances abroad and in articles that in the Israeli mindset and that of many individuals of the Jewish diaspora, Israel has no incentive to change and it is currently able to manage its interests both domestically and abroad. He argues that it is the right and even the duty of European countries and the US to criticize Israel’s policies, not out of an opposition to Jews or even to Zionism, but as a way to trigger a sustainable change for the state to truly be a democracy free of occupation and living in peace with its neighbors and within the international community. It is essential to separate identity and religion from political leaders, their interests and their errors, and in the case of Israel this would enable co-existence and peace amongst peoples, from Israeli and Palestinians all the way to French citizens.

Conclusion
A solution that truly promotes long lasting change can be found if anti-Semitism is treated not as an inborn and cultural ill but as an unacceptable result of social and political dynamics both in France and on a global scale. The French government must take a strong stance in favor of Israeli-Palestinian peace in a way that emphasizes the respect of both religious tolerance and human rights. In so doing, the French can tackle racism domestically while concurrently working towards a more permanent resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the world stage. Leaders are not perfect, and French politicians and members of French society must recognize significant caveats and double standards in the way they treat racism domestically, while Israelis, Jews and the international community must look upon the policies enacted by Israel as the decisions of individual leaders who make mistakes, and who must be pressured to reverse a dangerous conflation and a detrimental status quo of oppressive occupation. Voices are rising up at the civil society level, both in France and in the Middle East, from Christians, Jews, Muslims and others alike calling for a prioritization of justice, equality, coexistence and human compassion in reaction to the stigmas and socially constructed oppositions created on the behalf of religion or political alignment, and these carry the hope of inducing a progressive change in both the French and Israeli-Palestinian societies.
Works cited


CNDH. “Rapport annuel sur le racisme, l’antisémitisme et la xénophobie.” Commission


