

Perception, Prejudice, Projection

### Introduction

My central proposition in the following text is the observation that perceptions of the Middle East result as much from realities on the ground and their reflection in the media as from psychological needs. The latter are so crucial in this sphere because Israel and Palestine evoke deep emotions transcending current events. I refer here not only to the more than one hundred years old conflict between the modern Zionist movement and the Arabs of Palestine, but mainly to the associations with concepts such as: Holy Land, Christianity, Islam and above all Judaism. Israel is not **in** but **from** Europe. Awareness of European Christian Anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust could be considered the single most important element affecting European emotions toward the Middle East. In order to evaluate the influence of this element I find the Psychoanalytic concept of **projection** most useful. We can define the term as attribution of one's own attitudes, feelings, or memories to others.

Let me add in this short introduction a second observation: according to my experience scholars of (European) Anti-Semitism often know close to nothing about the Middle East, but it is also frequently the case that specialists of the Middle East are not sensitive enough to phenomena of Anti-Semitism. Speaking of projection in this context. I would consider it a grave methodological error for example to assume that modern Judeophobia in the Middle East could be reduced simply to a re-incarnation of European Anti-Semitism.

Projective views of Israel in Europe could be divided (very) schematically into four (often overlapping) categories:

- 1) Israel is bad because it is Jewish
- 2) Israel is good because it represents European (Western) values
- 3) Israel is bad because it represents Western (European) interests
- 4) Israel is good because it is Jewish

### On the "New Anti-Semitism"

Although it is of course true that esp. since 2000 (Second Intifada) verbal and sometimes physical attacks against Jews have increased in some European countries, it is problematic to describe these disturbing phenomena as "New Anti-Semitism". Why? Because in spite of the suffix "new" it implies the continuity and/or transformation of a traditional hostility. In other words: even a **return** to the 30's as is sometimes conjured up. But this diagnosis ignores the objective situation of Jewish Communities and the fact that the EU perceives itself after all as an anti-thesis to Nazism and the Holocaust. No state or relevant party has an Anti-Semitic platform. Even rightwing parties court Jewish candidates or votes and see them (as well as Israel) as (potential) allies against an Islamic threat. Jews are seen as Europeans, while Muslims are not. **Philosemitism** is quasi official, manifested in memorials, museums, culture.

Branding hostilities emanating from Middle East automatically or intentionally as Anti-Semitic is dangerous because doing so would banalize and trivialize genuine Anti-Semitism. It would, I suggest, also constitute a misjudgement of hostility by Muslims. Anti-Semitic

prejudice and bigotry of the Christian-European variant is not driving the big majority of Muslims and not even the few perpetrators of violence. The hostility toward Jews is rather a regrettable **by-product** of more recent events in the Middle East and the world over. A more detailed analysis would yield more specific results according to country, origins of immigrants, social status, area of residence etc. To blame Non-Europeans of Anti-Semitism might also conform to mechanisms of projection and/or externalization mentioned above.

In evaluating recent tendencies among Muslims in Europe the **global** context should not be underestimated. Talk about a “clash of civilizations” became widespread after the end of the Cold war, but esp., after 9/11. The atrocity of that day and other acts of “Jihadist” violence, often attributed to “Islam” created a climate in which Muslims could feel stigmatized collectively through a “guilt by association” mechanism. The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon could obviously be perceived as a “crusade” led by the Bush administration. And the same government with its Neocon and Evangelical allies could easily be perceived as following a (rightwing) Israeli agenda vis a vis Palestine and the Middle East. Add to this the globalized media: and you can imagine how pictures from all these fronts would affect an average Muslim audience. Aspects of the debate on **Turkey**’s relationship with Europe contribute to the uneasiness as well. I will return later to the issue of “Islamophobia” but let me now focus on another dimension of the “New Antisemitism”.

### **Aggravation**

An aggravation of the dilemma results from the fact that Israel defines itself as State of the Jewish people. Official Jewish communities accept this definition – and act accordingly. So it is not true that only Anti-Semites associate Jews with Israel (although in an accusatory way).

Another complication derives from an Israeli need to de-legitimize critique, opposition or resistance. This need is as old as the conflict in and over Palestine itself. Arab objection to the Zionist colonisation of Palestine was “explained” for internal and external consumption not as a rational and predictable behaviour but as groundless hatred deriving from culture, religion and – Anti-Semitism. Although leaders like Ben-Gurion or Jabotinsky knew better they used a mechanism of **projection** as well: experiences from anti-Semitic persecutions in Europe were transferred to the Middle East. Even today we often hear that settlers or soldiers are not attacked because they represent an occupation regime but simply because they are Jews.

A similar mechanism is used in an attempt de-legitimize accusations in Europe against Israeli state behaviour. In a vicious circle then the diagnosis of a “New Anti-Semitism” is used to prove the justice of the Zionist cause: Jews should leave Europe for a “safe haven” in Israel/Palestine.

### **Consequences**

European views on the Middle East should be studied carefully before passing a judgement on their significance and character. First of all it is necessary to ask the question: who is saying what, when and why? In other words: an examination of the speaker’s **motivation** is crucial.

An anti-Semitic motivation is evident if and when Israel is attacked “because” it is associated with Jews. In a similar vein equalizations between Israeli and Nazi behaviour (when made by Europeans, esp. Germans or Austrians) amount to an attempt to reduce feelings of guilt or responsibility for crimes committed against Jews during the Holocaust or even to justify such crimes. Here again a clear process of projection is at work. There was no “conflict” between

Nazis and Jews. In Israel/Palestine we do not deal with an act of genocidal madness. Basically Israelis fight Palestinians not because they are Arabs and Palestinians fight Israelis not because they are Jews. What we have here is rather a colonial conflict sui generis. But due to the long duration of the conflict a legitimacy superstructure developed on both sides. And in this process stereotypes, stigmata and prejudices of various origins served to demonize the opponent even further. This is moreover the most important **context** for Judeophobic as well as Holocaust denying statements by Arab and/or Muslim spokespeople – although other elements such as imports of European Anti-Semitism or exploitation of anti-Jewish passages in the Koran should not be under-estimated.

The “equalizers” ignore the character of the conflict - and they do so not out of sympathy for Palestinians: first of all they ignore the fact that Palestinians became indirect victims of European-Christian persecution of and violence against Jews. Thus: no reduction of guilt and responsibility. Second psychological needs lead to an (un-declared) **wish** that Palestinians **should** become the “Jews” of the Jews. Therefore terms such as “final solution”, “deportation” or “genocide” are gleefully attributed to Israeli policies.

### **Recommendations**

While any form of demonization should be avoided, it proves counterproductive to deny serious, even structural, violations of Palestinian rights. It is of course absurd to assume that these violations constitute a **reason** or even a **justification** for Anti-Semitism because – as is well known – genuine Anti-Semites will use any pretext to demonstrate their passion. But denial is not the answer. We have to establish a legitimate discourse that reflects realities on the ground, is guided by a perspective of equality and justice for both sides and takes historical responsibilities seriously into account. Such a discourse has to be distinguished from mechanisms of projection which **use** the drama in Israel/Palestine in order to feed old hatreds or serve new identity constructions. We have to denounce such patterns not only because of their self-centered and projective character but also because they tend to perpetuate mutual stigmatizations, violence and tragedy.

### **Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia**

Many observers, including former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, attribute the emergence of a “New Anti-Semitism” to the increased presence of Muslims in Europe. According to the problematic assumptions associated with this term, implicitly or explicitly they support theories and practices directed against an assumed “Muslim” threat. In the name of combating terrorism policies are endorsed which establish a link between Islam and/or Muslims collectively and violence. As mentioned above such generalizations tend to ignore specific circumstances, reasons and tensions which explain outbreaks of violence much better than just the adherence to a certain religion. Unfortunately such reasoning plays directly into the hands of a xenophobic right which would use any pretext to advocate a “return” to racial and cultural purity. Thus Islamophobia does not constitute an antithesis to Anti-Semitism but, regrettably, a legitimate or illegitimate brainchild of the “eternal hatred”. Let us try to demonstrate this observation by taking a closer look at the spectre of “Eurabia”, by focussing on **analogies**, without disregarding of course significant differences between the objective situations of past Jewish and present Muslim communities.

In disturbing analogy to notorious conspiracy theories it is assumed that sometime, somewhere a decision was made to invade Europe with Muslim immigrants in order to Islamize and subjugate the old continent. Those immigrants who in actual fact belong to the

poorest and least powerful strata of society are presented as mighty and capable of turning the non-Muslim populations into “Dhimmis”, a term signifying the subordinate status of Christians and Jews in classical Islam.

The same immigrants, many of them living for generations in Europe, are characterized as incapable of integration into the “host”-societies because of their religion, culture or race and not because they either face a certain kind of hostility or (rather few) just don’t want to give up their “identity”. No wonder that proponents of the “Eurabia” threat in accordance with the extreme right re-interpret multiculturalism as suicide, lament a demographic decline of the superior “white” human species and demand either over-assimilation or expulsion. It is bewildering to see heirs of Nazi collaboration celebrate the “Judeo-Christian tradition” (which was invented after the Holocaust) as a bulwark against “Islam”. Recently a leftwing variation of Islamophobia was added to the arsenal of hostility. It reminds me of the anti-Semitic trends during the Age of Enlightenment when Judaism was attacked by secularists primarily as representing medieval obscurantism and/or reactionary (anti-)social behaviour. Both variants see “Islam” as monolithic and essentialist. They focus only on negative features (which of course exist) and generalize them. They quote from the Koran like anti-Semites liked to quote from the Talmud in order to “explain” “Jewish” behaviour and “prove” the viciousness of Judaism. And like there were some Jewish chief witnesses used to confirm anti-Semitic prejudice, we have today some Muslims who are exploited in a similar way. Even the “double loyalty” refrain has made it into Islamophobic discourse.

In disturbing analogy only negative characteristics are associated with the presence and/or immigration of Muslims, no potential for creative interchange, no chance for mutual benefit – only a threat to “European values” which are constructed and re-invented as an antithesis to “Islam”.

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