When Governments Fail People:

The Weaponization of Antisemitism

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OP-ED

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There, in front of me, at a coffeeshop in Egypt, sits a man in his mid-fifties, wearing a shirt proudly sporting the SS (Schutzstaffel) symbol, celebrating the elite Nazi police corps. Out of curiousity, I initiate a conversation to discuss the anti-semitic symbolism behind the sign. Soon, the conversation becomes heated: “How can you defend them? Look what they have done to the Palestinians,” he exclaims.

This type of discussion is not uncommon in the Middle East or among staunch Palestinian supporters in general. The violence against Palestenians by the Israeli government, as well as the hostility towards neighbouring countries, has fostered animosity between Arabs and Jews for years, despite their shared semitic heritage. After the recent attacks on Sheikh Jarrah and Gaza, the long debate on the differences between antisemitism, anti-zionism, and anti-Israel has been reignited in the world, with no clear conclusion. The conflation between the terms, specifically antisemitism and anti-zionism, and their constant use and abuse in politics, have created an environment where ‘antisemitism’ has been weaponized; often to the point of being detrimental to everyone, particularly Jewish people. It is, therefore, imperative to begin a discussion about the origins of those terms, in an attempt to understand what they were originally used for, and what has become of them today.

Zionism and antisemitism have, since the coining of their names, been what many call strange bedfellows. One of the earliest mentions of Zionist political thought was by Leon Pinsker in the 19th century, who spoke of the concept of Judeophobia (referring to what is now antisemitism) and argued that the Enlightenment’s attempts at integrating the Jewish people into European society had failed (Ury 2018). In his work *Auto-Emancipation*, Pinsker builds his theory as a response to the pogroms and violence against Jews in the Russian Empire’s southwestern provinces. Judeophobia had become a “hereditary social disease” that was being “handed down and strengthened for generations and centuries”(Ury 2018, 1154). Thus, Pinsker urged his people to find a “national bond of union” and a home of their own, if not a country, declaring that “Judaism and Anti-Semitism passed for centuries through history as inseparable companions. Like the Jewish people, the real wandering Jew, Anti-Semitism, too, seems as if it would never die” (Ury 2018, 1154).

The term *Antisemitism* was coined by Wilhelm Marr in 1897 to describe the hatred of Jewish people as a singular group and race (Beller 2019). The term was "definable as a self-styled ideology and political movement" used by Marr at the time in order to combat Semitism in a quasi-battle of ideologies (Beller 2019, 1). It has since been inaccurately used to read history in reverse, using it to describe the religious antagonism against Jews dating back to the premodern period and Christian antiquity. Thereby wrongly naming the continuous string of pogroms and attacks on the Jewish people throughout history as antisemitism, adding to it an all-encompassing character for defining this particular type of prejudice. Accordingly, antisemitism is often seen as having a continuous, unending, and unique character that has followed Jewish people to this day with no clear ending in sight. This perception of what antisemitism constitutes has been the basis of a few ideologies. Some build their prejudice around it (i.e., being antisemitic), and others strive to end and combat it. One such ideology is Zionism.

This perception of the relationship between antisemitism and Judaism continued and evolved in Theodor Herzl's work, as he developed the ideology of Zionism into a full-fledged movement in 1897 when he convened the First Zionist Congress (Ury 2018, 1155). The term "Zionism," coined by Nathan Birnbaum in 1890 in the journal *Selbstemanzipation*, evolved through Herzl's work and became the defining ideology for Jewish emancipation and nationalism (Stanislawski 2017, 22). Zionism was, however, a nationalist and identity-based movement, similar to many other ideologies at the turn of the century, and not a religion-based one. The idea of the Founders was to -contrary to Jewish orthodox beliefs- no longer wait for the messiah, and take their fate, as the Jewish people, into their own hands, rebelling "fundamentally and viscerally against the political quietism which was the corollary of this messianic belief" (Stanislawski 2017, 3).

Accordingly, the ideology of Zionism was built on the idea that, since antisemitism lumped all Jews together, the fight against it should unite the Jewish people as one against oppression. The best way to fight the continuous, and according to some, infinite oppression, was to have a nation for Jews in which they could build a country – "a liberal, secular utopia of freedom and prosperity" – according to values that were fading from European society (Shanes 2019, 108). Herzl said, in what became the movement's mantra: "We are one people—our enemies have made us one in our despite . . . Distress

binds us together, and, thus united, we suddenly discover our strength" (Ury 2018, 1156). From then on, many scholars, intellectuals, and politicians have used antisemitism and Zionism as two sides of the same coin, continuously building upon one another. This relationship between the two translated strongly into the creation of the Jewish State of Israel, when the nation became the self-proclaimed speaker for all Jewish people. However, this perception and peculiar relationship between Zionism and antisemitism has triggered controversy amongst intellectuals like Salo Wittmayer Baron and Hannah Arendt, who refused the continuous attachment of the two.

Baron was fiercely opposed to “the lachrymose conception of Jewish history” and was against using antisemitism as a way of explaining or justifying Zionism or Zionist thought (Ury 2018, 1157). Voicing concerns over the consequences of using such rhetoric, he explained that these notions, also a part of the larger designs of Zionism, imply that the integration of Jewry into ‘normal life’ anywhere in the world other than their own land was not possible (Ury 2018, 1157). This perception could have extreme consequences on Jewish people around the world, enforcing antisemitic thoughts. On the other hand, Arendt argued that the view embraced by Pinsker and Herzl, that antisemitism is eternal, is not entirely true. In fact, she expressed the dangers of embracing such beliefs due to their “escapist basis” saying that “just as antisemites understandably desire to escape responsibility of their deeds, so Jews, attacked and on the defensive, even more understandably do not wish under any circumstances to discuss their share of responsibility” (Arendt 1966, 7). In other words, Arendt believes that seeing antisemitism as a natural part of life justifies the prejudice and even erases responsibility when it results in atrocious disasters like the Holocaust, which would “need no special explanation because they are natural consequences of an eternal problem” (Arendt 1966, 7).

This school of thought that both Arendt and Baron embrace, although in different ways, resulted in a lot of attacks on them both, particularly Arendt. However, the consequences of embracing antisemitism as a justification for Zionism have been particularly apparent in modern day politics, and Joshua Shanes argues as much in his work *Netanyahu, Orbán, and the Resurgence of Antisemitism: Lessons of the Last Century*. Shanes explains that in order to attain the goal of a Jewish safe haven, Herzl was “comfortable exploiting antisemitism for his own purposes” (Shanes 2019, 108).

Similarly, but to “scandalous new extremes,” Benjamin Netanyahu, the previous Prime Minister of Israel, and his supporters were “allying with anti-Semites and even promoting antisemitism themselves, even as they cynically claim to be its chief victim” (Shanes 2019, 108). Thus, the author argues that the leaders of Israel are creating a resurgence of a dangerous type of antisemitism by embracing it themselves for their own agendas. Consequently, he argues, they are “redefining the term antisemitism to mean opposition to Netanyahu’s policies –particularly the goal of “greater Israel – and redefining Jews to mean his supporters, particularly in Israel” (Shanes 2019, 109).

The use of the word antisemitism today, as Shanes argues, has come to mean anti-Israel, and vice-versa (Shanes 2019, 114). The most common argument against accusations of antisemitism, as well as the most common defence, has become the allegiance to or antagonism towards Israel. Said differently, if one –namely a politician– is accused of being antisemitic, their first line of defence is highlighting their positive relationship with the Jewish nation. Similarly, if one wants to attack an opponent and protect their own ideologies, they would accuse them of being antisemitic.

The later strategy is eloquently explained in Ivan Kalmar’s article *How Netanyahu Set Up Trump's 'But I Love Israel' Defense for Racism – and anti-Semitism* in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*. In his article, Kalmar describes this phenomenon as *anti-antisemitism*, a strategy to deflect from accusations of antisemitism and other forms of racism (Kalmar 2019). Kalmar posits that there has been a common trait among politicians, particularly American ones, to deflect from their own racism or antisemitism by using their allegiance to Israel. Similarly, when they would like to bring down an opponent, they accused them of being against the Israeli nation, and by extension antisemitic. Kalmar uses two main examples relating to the Republican Senator Josh Hawley and the former US President Donald Trump. In the first case, Senator Hawley uses the “antisemitic dog whistle ‘Cosmopolitan’” among other antisemitic tropes and therefore is accused of being antisemitic himself (Kalmar 2019). To this, he responded by highlighting his relationship to Jewish-Americans and his support for the Israeli nation, going to the point of saying: "You’ll have to carry me out on a slab before I compromise my defense of the Jewish people, their greatness, their history, their safety, and the state of Israel” (Kalmar 2019).

Trump similarly used his allegiance to Israel to defend himself. However, he most commonly used it to defend himself against accusations of racism. After telling four congresswomen of color to “go back to where they came from” he added his comment was particularly poignant because these women hated “Israel with a true and unbridled passion” (Kalmar 2019). By adding that they hated Israel, Trump added a layer of defense that added respectability to his otherwise racist comment “making it more palatable, even admirable, to "moderates" among his supporters” (Kalmar 2019). Accordingly, by injecting that they love Israel somewhere in their commentary, right-wing nationalists justify their use of antisemitic and racist discourse. Kalmar summarizes it by explaining: “The argument goes like this: "You say that I’m a racist. But I say that you’re an anti-Semite. Anti-Semitism is the worst form of racism. Therefore you’re a bigger racist than I am, so you can’t complain about my racism” (Kalmar 2019). This strategy of using Israel as a shield for whichever kind of racism a right-wing nationalist chooses to embrace is not unique to the United States.

Treating antisemitism as the worst form of racism fuels antisemitic discourse. Creating ‘untouchables’ of sorts fuels anger against the lack of nuance between what is allowed and what is not. If one expresses any criticism of Israel for their mistreatment of Palestinians, judge the current government for its killings and arrests of Arabs (be they Christian or Muslim), call it out on its mistreatement of Mizrahi Jews, or dare to call it an aparthaid state, they would be shunned and called out for antisemism in the political climate created by Netanyahu and those who have weaponized the term. Few, if any, other states get the *carte blanche* the Israeli propagandist machine has created for itself, at the cost of its own people.

Naftali Bennet, Israel’s new Prime Minister, is expected to be no different, if not worse, than his predecessor when it comes to weaponizing antisemitism. Bennet is far more right wing than Netenyahu, with well-known expansionist goals which he has repeatedly expressed over the years, making him known as a “territorial maximalist” (Kessler 2021). His unapologetic attitude towards his blatant dislike of Palestinians, his ardent defense of Israeli and zionist thought and settlement, forshadow little change in the political weaponization of antisemitism.

There is a balancing act between the consequences of antisemitism and the defense of zionism. Much of Israel's defense discourse relies on the persistent presence of a threat. The existential nature of the threat justifies using any means to defend the country. In other words, if there is a continuous existential threat, there is a need for severe and vicious defense. By extension, fearmongering is an essential part of justifying the violence, the ideology, and the general behaviour of the state. It is vital, however, to make a distinction between being a proponent of the zionist ideology (i.e., for the emancipation of the Jewish people) and being a supporter of the Israeli government.

It is perfectly justifiable and understandable to not support the blatant violence the Israeli government uses against its opponents, specifically against (often unarmed) Palestinians. The zionist ideology as they have shapped it has come to mean the destruction of Palestinians while feeding into a victimization narrative that is almost fatalist in nature, as Arendt had expressed. This endless loop of predatory vs victimizing behaviour has had massive consequences on the general populations of both the Arab world and Israel. Erasing history, denying the peaceful shared past between the descendants of Semites, raising generations of children on the notion of hatred of another people, based on their current governments' behaviours has been a disease in our region. Antisemitism, is unquestionably abhorrent and dangerous, but so are all forms of prejudice against any group of people (be it based on ethnicity or religion). The constant othering that has plagued our world, been weaponized by governments, and accepted by people is the most dangerous part of this entire issue. The deep-rooted hatred of the other has allowed governments and political leader's to infinitely abuse their powers.

Sporting an SS shirt proudly makes a person no less vile than someone who unapologetically says "let them eat crême brûlée", as the new Israeli Prime Minister has crudely stated when speaking of Palestinians (Remnick 2013). The only slight difference between them is that the latter is now the head of one of the strongest states in the world, and the other is an old man sitting placidly lamenting the fate of his neighbouring people.

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