European Jewry in an Era of Turmoil: Elections, Anti-Semitism, and Security Issues

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This chapter charts the response of Jewish communities to the atmosphere of political uncertainty prevalent throughout the European Union, examining the links between broader societal trends and rising anti-Semitism. It demonstrates why recent manifestations of anti-Semitism differ from previous occurrences, as European Jews now find themselves in a complicated relationship between the "new" left and the resurgent populist right in Europe. How Jewish communities have reacted to the new political instability and recent elections is examined, and key policy issues facing the EU – specifically terrorism and refugees – are delineated within the context of the Jewish communal response. Finally, the chapter scrutinizes the trend of rising anti-Semitism in Europe, focusing on the most problematic trends and areas where they are manifested.

The European Union (EU) is facing an unprecedented crisis. Uncertainty, societal conflict, political instability, and violence are evident throughout the 28-member state bloc. Extraordinary security measures – such as the

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ongoing state of emergency in France – have become the new norm in many European capitals, following a series of significant terrorist attacks. These developments, coupled with the massive influx of refugees and migrants, have helped shatter societal taboos and prompted a debate on complex issues concerning integration and multiculturalism, particularly in Germany and France. In June 2016, the British public voted narrowly to leave the EU, further aggravating the pan-European crisis, while in Eastern Europe, goverments continue to walk a tightrope, balancing post-communist national assertiveness with tolerance of existing minorities.

Jewish communities within the EU are far from immune to these trends, often finding themselves disproportionately affected and involved in policy debates, either as victims of rising anti-Semitism or leading advocates for tolerance of refugees. These developments have ignited an intra-communal debate, as Jewish communities struggle to reconcile conflicting impulses in the face of continuing political uncertainty. This debate joins traditional challenges, including aging populations, assimilation, and decreased political and societal power. This chapter analyzes three key trends affecting European Jews: the growing political instability in Europe; the influx of immigration and terrorism; and escalating anti-Semitism. It charts how different Jewish communities in Europe have responded to these trends, while delineating the correlation between increased political instability and anti-Semitism.

Political Instability and Polarization

The rise of right wing populism has created an increased sense of worry and suspicion among Jewish communities. In France, the far right Front Nationale (FN) nominee for president, Marine Le Pen, received 34 percent of the vote in 2017, despite calling for Jews to choose between French and Israeli citizenship and denying any French role in the Holocaust. In Hungary, Jobbik – a party accused of glorifying Hungary's pro-Nazi policies during World War II – holds 26 seats in Hungary's National Assembly following the 2018 elections, which represents 20 percent of the vote. In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which embodies significant tendencies advocating a new German culture of remembrance and historical revisionism, entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 94 seats, or 12.6 percent of the vote. In Austria, elections on October 15, 2017 witnessed the Far Right Freedom Party (FPO) win third place, with a 5 percent swing to the party. Even the potential entry of these movements – previously relegated to the political

wilderness – into government represents uncharted waters for many Jewish communities. Reflecting a more nuanced position than their predecessors, contemporary right wing populist parties often combine xenophobia with strongly pro-Israel sentiments, as demonstrated by the AfD, FPO, FN, and the Netherlands' Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV). However, the mainstream Jewish establishment continues to treat these parties with suspicion, concerned that endemic anti-Semitism within the far right has not declined, but is instead thinly concealed by a populist anti-Islamic message for the sake of political expediency.

Simultaneously, populism is not a uniquely right wing phenomenon. Whereas moderate, West European social democratic parties frequently obtained a majority of Jewish votes in previous decades, a "new" anti-globalization left – often scathingly critical of Israel – has catapulted from the extremist fringes to the political mainstream. This trend is particularly salient in the United Kingdom, since the election of the left wing Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in September 2015. Corbyn previously referred to Hamas and Hezbollah as "friends," and under his leadership, a surge in anti-Semitism within the Labour Party led to an internal investigation. However, the significant media attention resulting from anti-Semitism scandals only affected Jewish voters, with the party out-performing predictions in the general election of June 2017. This trend was repeated in the French presidential election, where far left candidate Benoit Hamon received over seven million votes, though the Jewish community was appalled by his dismissal of increased anti-Semitism in France and his characterization of Israel as "colonial."[1]

Jewish communal reactions against the ongoing populist, nationalist trend are exemplified by the June 2016 United Kingdom referendum on European Union membership: whereas 52 percent of voters backed "Brexit," around 59 percent of British Jews voted to retain the status quo.[2] Nevertheless, a limited number of outliers within local Jewish communities have given their backing to the populist right. In 2012, more than 13 percent of French Jews reported voting FN, while in the Netherlands the PVV polled around 10 percent of Jewish support.[3] Conversely, Corbyn's leadership precipitated a sharp decline in Jewish support, with only 13 percent of British Jews voting Labour in 2017. Similarly, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has increasingly alienated the Jewish community by adopting xenophobic and anti-cosmopolitan rhetoric that some argue is tinged with anti-Semitism.[4]

By contrast, French expatriates in Israel supported centrist Emmanuel Macron, winner of the 2017 presidential election, over FN's Marine Le Pen, with Macron winning an overwhelming 96.3 percent of the French Israeli vote.[5] Thus, Jewish voters appear largely removed from populist sentiments sweeping Europe, though this places many communities in the uncomfortable position of being at odds with prevailing public opinion.

Security, Borders, and Terrorism

The recent influx of refugees to Europe has challenged European Jewry to act in a spirit of social responsibility. Many members of the community feel that Jews – as former refugees themselves – have a historical and moral duty to help those in need. This tendency is demonstrated by Britain's World Jewish Relief, which ran assistance programs to non-Jewish refugees in Greece and Turkey, while helping 1000 refugees integrate into British society.[6] Indeed, the often fractious British Jewish community was united in shock at tragic pictures of refugees, such as the three-year-old Alan Kurdi, who drowned while fleeing conflict zones.[7] Similar trends were evident in Germany; the Jewish German umbrella organization met with Muslim organizations to discuss the challenges of refugee integration in Germany, while Jewish and Muslim social workers cooperated to help refugees.[8] Likewise, French Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia called on French Jews to assist refugees;[9] in Belgium, the left-leaning CCLJ Jewish organization called for Jews to "act generously" and help migrants. In Hungary – which refuses to accept refugees – Prime Minister Orban passed a bill allowing refugee detention and transfer to Serbia,[10] which led the local Jewish community to actively oppose government policy, condemning anti-migrant public discourse as "hate speech."[11]

Nevertheless, the perceived European Jewish moral prerogative to support refugees is tempered by fears that migrants – many of whom come from nations hostile to Israel – could bring anti-Semitic sentiments with them. Though anti-Semitic violence in Germany is still rare, there have been high profile cases of attacks against Jewish property and individuals by members of the Muslim community, such as the firebombing of a synagogue in the city of Wuppertal in 2014.[12] German Jews feel a great sense of responsibility to help in refugee camps, though many report they are afraid to identify themselves as Jews.[13] Jews in France have long felt under threat, following recurring attacks against Jewish supermarkets, synagogues, and community

members, such as the killing of a French rabbi and three schoolchildren at a Jewish school in 2012. Opinion polling of French Jews suggests community members perceive the most preeminent source of anti-Semitism as emanating from the Muslim community; 37 percent of Jewish parents fear their children could be victims of an anti-Semitic attack.[14]As a result, though the French Jewish community is numerically the largest in Europe, its numbers are dwindling as members are emigrating to Israel, London, or Canada.[15]

Concurrently, opinion polls suggest that British Jews harbor growing feelings of communal insecurity.[16] The string of terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom in 2017 caused concern throughout the community, and the police and private security presence around community institutions increased.[17] The Islamic State has announced plans to target British Jews, a threat the community takes seriously,[18] particularly because the terrorist group claims to have sent 1,000 fighters to Europe in the guise of refugees.[19] Thus, throughout Europe, the recent spike in attacks against Jews frequently originates from the same groups that European Jewry is eager to stand up for: the refugee population from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Threatened and actualized anti-Semitic attacks pose not only a threat, but also create inter-communal tension within European Jewish communities, who struggle to balance competing desires for security and solidarity.

Anti-Semitism Facing the Community

More than 70 years after the Holocaust, anti-Semitism continues and is even growing in Europe. Indeed, a survey conducted in 2016 by the European Union in nine member states, including France, Germany, and the UK noted a demonstrable rise in anti-Semitism in recent years. While two thirds of self-identified Jewish respondents saw anti-Semitism as a concern in their country, 76 percent noticed a rise in anti-Semitism in the last five years.[20] Though not necessarily anti-Semitic, issues of religious clothing and freedom continue to affect European Jews to a disproportionate degree. For instance, during her election campaign in October 2016 FN presidential candidate Marine Le Pen called for the banning of overt religious symbols, including Jewish ones.[21] Furthermore, Denmark and Sweden have banned kosher and halal slaughter, due to animal rights concerns, with Denmark also considering a ban on infant male circumcision out of human rights considerations.[22]

Across the continent, manifestations of anti-Semitism differ. Violent attacks against Jews are the most noticeable in France, but Swedish Jews are more afraid to be publicly recognizable as Jews. France has the highest numbers of Jews considering leaving the country, followed by Germany.[23] In addition, opinion polls taken among non-Jewish Germans show that 10 percent of respondents openly state their anti-Semitism, thinking of Jews as different or even inferior.[24] Often anti-Semitism is connected to anti-Israel attitudes; an opinion poll of non-Jewish British citizens taken in 2015 noted that 20 percent of respondents saw British Jews as more loyal to Israel than to the UK.[25] In Eastern Europe, anti-Semitism is also resurgent in countries with very few Jews – such as Poland – where younger generations exhibit more anti-Semitic sentiments than their parents.[26] An opinion poll among the European Jewish population conducted by the EU in 2013 showed that 40 percent of Jews experienced or saw violence perpetrated by "someone with an extremist Muslim view," while 20 percent of respondents identified the perpetrator as left wing; 14 percent identified the culprit as a right winger.[27]

While the rise of anti-Semitism is an overall trend, the source and nature of anti-Jewish prejudice differs on a case-by-case basis. Among its neighbors, Hungary stands out for claims of state-sanctioned anti-Semitism by the Orban government. These allegations have been particularly salient in the ongoing campaign by the government and other right wing parties against the perceived influence of liberal-leaning, prominent Jewish billionaire George Soros in Hungarian politics.[28] The campaign caused a schism between the local Jewish community and the Israeli government, with the Netanyahu administration accused of abandoning the concerns of Hungarian Jews in exchange for warm bilateral ties between both nations.[29] In France, 63 percent of the Jewish respondents of a 2015 poll personally experienced anti-Semitism in their daily lives.[30] In Britain, where cumulative anti-Semitism manifests less violently than in France, community leaders have noted the rise of online anti-Semitism, particularly on social media;[31] a senior member of the British Jewish community establishment suggested that "cyber hate" constitutes one of the most pertinent challenges for the community.[32]

Dealing with increased and diverse forms of anti-Semitism across Europe is complicated by severe budgetary restraints in securing community institutions, which hampers communal responses to increased anti-Semitism; increased government security often only materializes after terrorist attacks occur. In many cases, Jews have reacted by leaving their native countries. This

is most evident in France: in 2013, French Jews were the largest group of new immigrants to Israel. Opinion polls also suggest a growing number of British Jews see their future outside their home country.[33] Several French community leaders have suggested that observant Jews consider hiding any overtly religious symbols in public, such as skullcaps.[34] On the other hand, non-Jewish French politicians vowed to wear skullcaps in a show of solidarity with the Jewish community after an anti-Semitic stabbing in Marseille, in January 2016.[35]

Conclusions and Implications

Throughout contemporary Europe – as in many historical examples worldwide – there is a clear correlation between political instability and anti-Semitism. While complex issues such as the refugee crisis, border security, and the future of the European Union are not explicitly "Jewish" issues, European Jews have been disproportionately affected by the political and social paradigm shift underway across the continent. Despite their small numbers relative to their non-Jewish compatriots, European Jews have been the deliberate targets of terrorist attacks, while often finding their own views at odds with prevailing populist winds sweeping the continent. European Jews are often more acutely aware of the rising anti-Israeli sentiment on the left, but are also more sensitive to right wing populism and extreme nationalist currents. Nevertheless, while Jews may be more likely to demonstrate empathy for refugees than many of their compatriots, other minority groups are more likely to hold unfavorable opinions of Jews, which sometimes manifest in violent anti-Semitism. Overall, European Jews are enduring an evolving and complicated relationship between the "new" left and the resurgent populist right in Europe, with the boundaries between allies and enemies no longer clearly defined.

The diversified threats and issues facing the Jewish communities of Europe are significant. Clearly anti-Semitism is no longer the political preserve of any specific ideology or demographic group, if it ever was. The trends illustrated in this chapter have proved controversial within Jewish communities, with opinions increasingly polarized. The lack of a communal consensus may well continue to be a salient trend if not addressed by community organizations, which are liable to struggle to formulate a consensus position when dealing with external groups and authorities. If instability continues, Jewish communities are likely to be increasingly challenged by continued

movement of constituents to Israel, diminishing the social and political power of long-established communities. Simultaneously, the instability within the European Union shows no signs of abating, suggesting both Jewish and non-Jewish citizens should anticipate the continuation of ongoing political and social shifts across the continent. Governments must reassure Jewish communities by remaining vigilant against all forms of anti-Semitism, including from other minority communities or the far left. Additionally, Jewish communities and the State of Israel should be wary of offers of support from "reformed" ultra-nationalist groups that may support Israel while demonizing local minorities. However, and due to the nuanced nature of perceived threats, just as anti-Semitism is not uniform across Europe, neither is nor should be the Jewish response.

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