

‘Don’t Hear O Israel!’

By Sarah Fainberg

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How anti-Israel protests across Europe are and should stay irrelevant to Israel’s national security policy.

At this moment a black Swastika adorns Paris’s Statue de la République – the sacrosanct symbol of the French Republic – which for the past few weeks has also been covered with Palestinian, Algerian, Turkish and Islamic State flags in protest against Israel’s Operation Protective Edge to prevent Hamas missile attacks and terrorist infiltration into mainland Israel.

Since the operation began on July 8, thousands of pro-Palestinian protesters have flooded the streets of Western Europe, especially my native Paris, torching Jewish shops, a community center and eight synagogues while chanting “Death to Jews!” and “Burn the Jews!” These episodes add to the record-breaking 169 anti-Semitic incidents officially recorded in the first quarter of 2014, a 40 percent increase over 2013. Israeli politicians have taken such incidents seriously, even convening an emergency session of the Knesset on July 28.

While appalled by the resurgence of anti-Semitism, some in Israel and abroad warn the Israeli government that the Gaza situation could lead to an increase in anti-Semitic attacks in Europe, assuming that if Israel stopped its operation in Gaza, anti-Jewish violence would recede to the fringe. Yet the assumption that the frequency and virulence of anti-Jewish violence since the second intifada directly correlates to Israel’s political decisions and military actions has proven false.

Therefore, the Israeli government should not let foreign, anti-Israel grassroots criticism influence its national security policy, no matter how widespread, violent and threatening it becomes for Diaspora Jewry.

What ultimately endangers the Jews of Western Europe is not the Operation Protective Edge nor the Middle East conflict but the resurgence of a European strain of anti-

Semitism – ironically salient among a significant proportion of second- and third-generation Muslims – which has used anti-Zionism as a rhetorical façade for decades. As the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch noted in 1978, anti-Zionism became a magical formula enabling one to be “democratically anti-Semitic.”

In Spinoza’s philosophical terms, Israel and Zionism are demonized not because they are bad but because they are hated. Today, French and Western Jews are experiencing the “Israeli moment” of a 1,000-year history of European anti-Semitism, a phenomenon that Tel Aviv University Professor Yossi Shain and I labeled the “Israelization of anti-Semitism.” It is this widespread and grassroots Israelization of Jew-hatred, which converted the 19th century “Jewish question” into the 21st century “Israeli question,” that explains today’s demonstrations of hatred, not Israel’s recent military operation that led to the death of over 1,600 people in Gaza, most of them civilians.

If these protests were truly predicated upon Israel’s concrete actions and not on a resurfacing anti-Jewish passion, more of those well-intentioned souls would have taken to the streets against the Syrian government’s massacre of 160,000 civilians, including 1,800 Palestinians since 2011 or Russia’s killing of 150,000- 200,000 Muslim Chechens between 1994 and 2003.

Second, the explosion of anti-Zionism and the ever thinner distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is not, as French politicians reassure themselves, a mere “importation of the Middle East conflict” but the expression of a full-blown Western European identity crisis. Particularly in France, anti-Zionism stems from a selective identification with the Palestinian cause – and among the most radicals with the Islamist and jihadist Hamas – that serve as an “identity of substitution” for young disaffected youth that are (legitimately) angry at the blindness and failure of the French republican establishment and French elites.

In the words of journalist Gil Michaili, anti-Zionism is the “cement of beur [French North African] identity,” powerfully uniting the otherwise heterogeneous populations of Muslim North African descent. As French sociologist Vincent Tiberj showed in 2005 in an extensive public survey of young people of North African, African and Turkish Muslim origin, anti-Jewish and anti-Israel prejudice among them was 10 to 15 points higher than in the general French population of the same age group and has turned into a distinctive identity feature.

Furthermore, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism have become a way to channel anti-government, anti-establishment and anti-elite frustration. Shouts like “Jews, go home!”, “Jews, France is not yours!” already erupted in Paris on January 26, 2014, during a mass anti-government demonstration whose goal was President Francois Hollande’s resignation and not Israel’s “racist,” “apartheid” and “genocidal” politics. Finally, the anti-Israel protests must be seen through the prism of a growing culture of urban violence and removal of the anti-racist taboo dominant in Western Europe through the 1980s.

Apart from supporting aliya, Israel’s government can do little to eliminate the threats

facing European Jews.

Those acts of violence ultimately stem from a failure of the EU project and a failure of European states' politics of identity, integration and memory. In the grim prediction of French columnist Ivan Roufiol this past month, "France could be confronted, in turn, to the same challenges that Hamas imposes upon Israel. The Salafism that spreads across the disaffected banlieues make possible similar intifadas."

*The author is a Research Fellow at **INSS**.*

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