



Contraditório think-tank

Briefing

The alarming growth of Anti-Semitism in Europe - a time for reflection | Just Castillo Iglesias

These days, Europe is experiencing the major spread of anti-Semitic sentiment since World War II. This alarming fact, however, remains fairly unknown to most people, and it is not an issue that commonly meets the public eye.

Growing negative attitudes towards Jews is a general trend in most European countries, and despite it is often camouflaged as critical attitudes towards the State of Israel or its policies, it has strong anti-Semitic components, fueled by old topics and stereotypes that are reminiscent of the darkest periods of the history of our continent. In the 21st Century, nobody likes to claim him or herself an anti-Semite. Nevertheless, hidden behind the labels of anti-Zionism, or criticism towards the State of Israel, guilt of xenophobia seems to be left behind. Yet, under such labels, there is often a basis of thought that retains resentment and distrust towards Jewish people, a phenomenon which

is defined by Taguieff as Neo Anti-Semitism^[i].

Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly if one takes into account the long history of hatred against Jews that extends until the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975*, Spanish society has today an alarming anti-Semitic sentiment which is the highest in Europe and in the Western world according to various sources^{[ii][iii][iv]}. According to the recent studies by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Pew Research Centre, over 58% of Spaniards declared having negative feelings towards Jewish people in 2009. The Pew Research Centre concluded that negative attitudes in Spain towards Jews had doubled in three years, from 21% in 2005 to 46% in 2008. Spain is not only the European country with the largest population segment expressing such unfavorable attitudes, but also, it is the only country in which this

* Spain did not recognize the State of Israel and established diplomatic relations until 1986.



percentage was higher than that of those expressing favorable views. It is rather surprising that with an estimated figure of 35,000 Jews among a total population of about 48 million, Spaniards have such negative sentiment towards a collective they are highly unlikely to interact with on a daily basis.

Nonetheless, Spain is not the only country where such alarming attitudes are on the rise. Since the early 2000s, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden have experienced a rise in violent acts towards Jews or Jewish properties, and incidents have not been unheard of in several other countries such as France or the UK. Despite such countries have a significant numbers of immigrants with Arab origins, and pro-Palestinian groups are commonly linked with such acts, also indigenous Europeans are taking part on such acts of vandalism, as it has been specially in the cases of Germany and Austria^[v].

The plausible reasons for this rise of Anti-Semitic sentiment in Europe are manifold, and history, stereotypes and prejudices still have a major impact. According to the 2009 surveys of the ADL, covering 8 different European countries, since the outburst of the current financial crisis, the number of European citizens that believe that “Jews have

too much power in business world and financial circles” has experimented an increase in some of the reviewed countries, notably Spain, Poland and Hungary. On this line, and according to the ADL report of 2009, a 43% of Austrians, 15% of French, 30% of Germans, 46% of Hungarians, 38% of Poles, 25% of Spaniards and 16% of Brits blame the Jews for the ongoing financial crisis in some way. Continuing with the classical anti-Semite stereotypes, the percentage of people agreeing to the statement “Jews are responsible for the death of Christ” has slightly risen in Germany, Hungary and substantially in Poland, since the 2007 reports.

Contrary to what one would be inclined to think, Anti-Semitism in Europe today does not only come from far-right extremism. Neo-Nazi movements have gained force in a number of countries, particularly in Germany^[vi] and Eastern Europe, and it has become a growing concern in countries such as Russia, where anti-Semitic rhetoric has also experienced an alarming rise^{[vii][viii]}. However, as it has been manifested by experts as Tagieff and others^[ix], the overly pro-Palestinian discourse of the European left and extreme-left as well as anti-globalization/anti-capitalist movements is responsible in part for



such increases in anti-Jewish sentiments. Over the recent years, the rhetoric of European left-wing movements has moved towards an uncritical overly supportive of the Palestinian cause, not without entering in contradiction with the very own ideals such movements stand for. It has been argued, that the end of the ideological conflict in the early 1990s caused a crisis of references among the European left, which has found refuge, first in a manifested anti-Americanism (particularly in countries such as France or Spain) and later, in the defense of the Palestinian cause as an ideal of struggle for freedom, and impersonating the victim of imperialist oppression^[x].

As an illustrative example to this, and coming back to the Spanish case, is a public demonstration convoked by the Catalonia-based NGO “*Aturem la Guerra*” (Stop the War) in January 2009 was to protest against the Gaza war. This demonstration became the scenario of unsettling xenophobic claims against Israel by the pro-Palestinian activists: banners with slogans such as “Israel=Genocide” and swastika crosses, linking yet again Israeli policy with Nazism hit the streets of Barcelona. Despite genuinely solidary citizens marched on that demonstration alongside the pro-Palestinian activists, a preoccupying presence of people

with a heavily agitated mood making radical proclaims and burning Israeli flags, as well as a strong presence of people with Arab origins, a minority of which has been described as displaying ‘jihadist aesthetics’^[xi], characterized the event. My point, obviously, is not to criticize or judge people’s looks, and even less to criminalize people for their Arab origins. But it has to be taken into account that this demonstration was about a very controversial topic, and that experts agree – and thus police forces know– that Spain, and very particularly Catalonia, has become the epicenter of Salafism in Europe^{[xii][xiii][xiv]}, and therefore an overly condescending attitude towards such kind of manifestations can potentially give place to serious security concerns.

These people marched shouting proclaims for the boycott of Israel, in favor of Hamas, and condemning Israel for ‘genocidal practices’. This demonstration became an agitated public controversy when pamphlets were distributed depicting 5 renowned journalists and personalities who are outspoken on the critical defense of Israel alongside swastika crosses, and some of them received threats for defending their ideas. Moreover, a demonstrator with covered face was spotted rising a gun, and police forces could not arrest him despite the strong visual



impact of that scene, as the gun was a mock plastic replica. The highest point of the controversy, though, came from the fact that several Cabinet Members of the Catalan Government, all of them affiliated to the different parties of the left-wing tripartite coalition, including Mr. Joan Saura, then Catalan Minister of the Interior and also chief of the Catalan Police, attended the demonstration. When enquired and afterwards about the indulgence towards a demonstrator carrying a gun, Mr. Saura described the event as a ‘street performance’, making emphasis on the fact that it was a mock gun instead of a real one. Days after the event, and given the controversy the demonstration had arisen, the Catalan President approved the presence of his Cabinet Members in the event, despite he declared ‘not necessarily sharing the attitudes and verbal proclaims of the demonstrators’^[xv]. The course of these events alarmed the Israeli Ambassador to Spain, who sent an letter to the Catalan President requesting for a tighter control on anti-Semitic proclaims and to condemn the violent acts that took place during the event^{[xvi][xvii]}. In any case, this excessive tolerance towards this sort of xenophobic speech and attitudes, of which this case is an example, should be an object of reflection in today’s European left, and

particularly in the case of Spain due to the rapid advance of anti-Semitism in the country.

My purpose is not to call for an uncritical defense of Israel, on the contrary. Israeli policies have certainly not been exempt of mistake or censurable moves. However, the demonization and defamation against Israel present on certain clearly biased media[†] and by some sectors of the civil society, clearly reveals anti-Semitic, and thus xenophobic, tendencies. Anti-Israeli discourse is often far from objectively critical, and since unfortunately the public has assimilated it as a ‘natural’ thing, it is worth to give some thought at the easiness with which many times such discourse associates Israel with ‘genocidal’ or ‘criminal’ practices towards the Palestinian people, and how many times the Holocaust is trivialized by associating this concept with Israeli policy. Extremisms seldom have positive outcomes, and in this case it is neither positive the ‘goodism’ with which the Palestinian links with fundamentalism are looked upon, nor the dogmatic demonization of Israel.

[†] In 2009, fourteen US Congressmen expressed on a letter to the Spanish Government their concern about the rising Anti-Semitism, and urged Prime Minister Zapatero to adopt resolute measures to prevent such rhetoric in the country’s media after a series of anti-Semitic articles and political cartoons appeared in several newspapers.



The Arab-Israeli conflict is long and complex. So complex that the parts do not even agree on how it began. However, due to media biases, with half-truths and oversimplification, and the mandates of political correctness in today's Europe, many people seem to have come to a rudimentary and deeply unfair understanding that Israel is the embodiment of evil, and that all Palestinians are innocent victims.

Passed the first decade of the 21st Century, time has come for a deep reflection and for a collective act of self-honesty on this matter. Despite the mistakes Israel might have made on its policies, we cannot forget so easily that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle-East and the only country in that region that is able and willing to solve conflicts through negotiation and civilized manners. Israel is a free country that guarantees the rights of its citizens, and in which Arab citizens have become Ministers or Members of the Knesset with democratic normality.

In the past, Israel has made significant concessions when it had a chance to come out to a peace agreement with its neighbors, and there is no reason for it not continuing to do so. One cannot lose from sight the fact that Israel has, as any other country, the right to exist and to develop peacefully within secure

and controllable borders; to pursue the safety and happiness of its citizens, Jewish or not; and to have peaceful and civilized relations with its neighbors. Israel does not suppose a threat to its neighbors, but it has to ensure and fight for its self-defense and security. It is important to remember that, since its establishment in 1948, Israel has been at all moments under threat of annihilation by some of its regional neighbors, either through direct military action or through terrorism, and one of the first impediments to peace in the region is that the Palestinian side, as well as many of the region's countries, including Lebanon and Syria with whom Israel shares international borders, do not recognize its right to exist. If those who threaten Israel would put down their weapons, peace would come quickly. However, if Israel puts down its weapons, it would unquestionably be erased from the map.

The human losses, particularly of innocent civilians, and damages that this enduring conflict has caused are deeply regrettable, and are indeed its darkest side. But before simplistically demonizing Israeli actions, we must also reflect and put ourselves on the skin of Israeli families, who have to live with the fear that their children's school bus could easily become the target of a suicide bombing or of any sort of terrorist



attack. Similarly, before simplistically portraying all Palestinians as victims of Israeli violence, one must also think of those Palestinian mothers who fear their children could become targeted by advocates of Islamic fundamentalism, brainwashed to die as martyrs, and used as suicide bombers on the name of the jihad against Israel. We must also think of those Arab women who live deprived of rights and under brutal repression due to radical Islamism. Israel is a democracy, and as such, it should be accountable, it should be object of legitimate criticism, and we must have high demands upon its actions. However, before dogmatically demonizing and delegitimizing it, and as citizens of the free democratic world, we must be critical and recognize that the best ally for a future Palestinian State should be the democratic State of Israel, not Islamic fundamentalism or jihadism.

As Europeans, coming from a continent that cherishes the values of social justice, equality and freedom, we should not overlook such values when making a judgment on this long and deeply enrooted conflict, and we should not substitute critical thinking by dogmatic proclaims. As democrats, we should certainly stand by fairness and justice, but we should also stand firmly by democracy.

Neither all Palestinians are victims, nor Israel is the ultimate evil-doer, and such views are not only intolerant, but also profoundly unjust. We should watch out not lose the sense of justice while trying to defend fair causes.

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ⁱ “*El nuevo antisemitismo*” in Taguieff, P.A. (2002), *La nueva judeofobia*, Gedisa.

ⁱⁱ *Attitudes Toward Jews in Seven European Countries*. Report, Anti-Defamation League. February 2009.

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http://www.adl.org/Public%20ADL%20Anti-Semitism%20Presentation%20February%202009%203_.pdf on 23/11/2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Estudio sobre Antisemitismo en España - Informe de Resultados*. Instituto DYM for Casa Sefarad-Israel.

Accessed at

http://www.euromedalex.org/sites/default/files/105501_25_inf_rev%207-9.pdf on 23/11/2011.

^{iv} *Congresistas de EEUU critican artículos y viñetas antisemitas en El País*. Libertad Digital. Accessed at <http://www.libertaddigital.com/mundo/congresistas-de-eeuu-piden-a-zapatero-que-tome-medidas-por-el-antisemitismo-en-espana-1276358552/> on 23/11/2011.

^v *Report on Global Anti-Semitism*. US Department of State. Accessed at

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/40258.htm> on 23/11/2011.

^{vi} *One German State's Losing Battle Against Extremism*. Der Spiegel, 09/06/2011. Accessed at

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,784686,00.html> on 23/11/2011.

^{vii} *Chanting ‘Russia for Russians,’ thousands of nationalists and neo-Nazis march through Moscow*. Coordination Forum for Countering Anti-Semitism. Accessed at

<http://antisemitism.org.il/article/68036/chanting-%E2%80%98russia-russians%E2%80%99-thousands-nationalists-and-neo-nazis-march-through-moscow> on 23/11/2011.



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- ^{viii} The rise of neo-Nazism in Eastern Europe is a sign that fascism lives. WCRJ. Accessed at <http://www.wcrj.org/en/news/detail.php?ID=879> on 23/11/2011.
- ^{ix} *Ideas y enfoques. Entrevista a Pilar Rahola.* BÚSQUEDA. Montevideo. 14/09/2006, P. 36.
- ^x *Entrevista de Henrique Cymerman a Pilar Rahola, galardonada "Orden del Presidente de la Universidad de Tel Aviv".* From Israeli TV Network. Accessed at <http://youtu.be/Jt4EOfsJIM> on 23/11/2011.
- ^{xi} *Aturem la Guerra respon a Pilar Rahola.* (2009). Televisió de Catalunya. Accessed at <http://www.tv3.cat/videos/972089/Aturem-la-Guerra-respon-a-Pilar-Rahola> on 26/11/2011.
- ^{xii} *Guide to Islamist Movements.* Rubin, B. (2009) M E Sharpe Inc. P. 531-544.
- ^{xiii} *¿Ama el salafismo a Cataluña?.* ABC (27/12/2010) Accessed at <http://www.abc.es/blogs/perez-maura/public/post/ama-el-salafismo-a-cataluna-7504.asp> on 26/11/2011.
- ^{xiv} *En 2010 se celebraron diez congresos salafistas en España, mientras que en 2008 solo hubo uno.* Alerta Digital (27/12/2010). Accessed at <http://www.alertadigital.com/2010/12/27/en-2010-se-celebraron-diez-congresos-salafistas-en-espana-mientras-que-en-2008-solo-hubo-uno/> on 26/11/2011.
- ^{xv} *Montilla aprueba la asistencia de Saura a la manifestación por Gaza.* Europa press. Accessed at <http://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-oproximo-montilla-aprueba-asistencia-saura-manifestacion-gaza-20090121181801.html> on 23/11/2011.
- ^{xvi} *El embajador de Israel en España, Raphael Schutz, pide a Montilla que condene los actos "difamatorios" contra su país.* La Vanguardia 19/01/2009. Accessed at <http://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20090119/53621741099/el-embajador-de-israel-en-espana-raphael-schutz-pide-a-montilla-que-condene-los-actos-difamatorio.html> on 26/11/2011.
- ^{xvii} *Què està succeint a Catalunya? Carta oberta al President de la Generalitat de Catalunya* (20/01/2009). Accessed at http://www.pilarrahola.com/3_0/ARTICULOS/default.cfm?ID=1627&SUBFAM=45 on 26/11/2011.