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# French Jews

*The response of French Jews to the post-1967 outburst of antisemitism offers lessons that can help us today*



AMAS's October 7 slaughter of Jews in Israel and the Israeli response in Gaza have created a stunning backlash against Jews in the name of anti-Zionism. Episodes from the Holocaust such as Kristallnacht have been invoked, but this time it is primarily left-wing rather than right-wing action against Jews that we are seeing, whether in the form of mass demonstrations or violent rhetoric and sometimes violent acts on university campuses.

The warning signs have been there for years, and it is not my concern to recount them here. But is there a model from history for understanding what is happening? And, given the decades-long head start that our enemies now enjoy in the war of ideas, how might Jews respond over the long term to those drawing from a linguistic arsenal stocked with lazy, jargon-based, anti-Israel lies about colonialism,

apartheid, and genocide, all tied together by righteous fury and rhythmic sloganeering?

How the Jews of France responded to a similar outburst of anti-semitic action and rhetoric in the 1960s and 1970s offers a template we should consider.



As it still does today, France at the time boasted the largest Jewish population in Western Europe. Even after the Holocaust, for many, being Jewish in republican France still meant not pressing community interests in the public sphere, where the universal aims of humanity were to prevail over communal concerns. Yet the Holocaust was a turning point for many, too: Jews who survived the Nazi occupation, especially Jewish members of the Resistance, fully supported Israel, as did the French children of postwar Eastern European and North African immigrants. They were French first, but it was Israel that they saw as offering a guarantee against another Auschwitz. As the French-Jewish intellectual Raymond Aron put it, “Religious or not religious, Zionist or anti-Zionist, no Jew can be objective when it comes to Israel.”

For French Jews, as for many others, the lead-up to the Six-Day War of June 1967 portended a second Holocaust, this time in the Middle East. Given the massed forces of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, along with the loud and repeated declarations of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser that the Jewish state would be destroyed and the prediction of Ahmad al-Shuqayri, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), that “no Jew would remain alive,” it seemed impossible that Israel would survive. As a result, Israel’s stunning victory, based primarily on Mirage jets purchased from France, was greeted as a miracle.

But the anti-Israel and even anti-Jewish backlash in France was shocking. President Charles de Gaulle's November 1967 comments that the Jews "have remained as they have always been, an elite people, self-assured and domineering" and that Israel was "a warlike state resolved to aggrandize itself" were stunning to French Jews. For Jean Daniel, a journalist and former member of the Resistance, it was de Gaulle's reference to all Jews as a separate people that was the main shock. Were French Jews no longer French? French republicanism since 1791 had promised equal citizenship. Vladimir Jankélévitch, a Jew who had also been part of the Resistance, called de Gaulle's comment a slander. Did France, he asked, keep England out of the Common Market in 1967 because the English were a "mercantile people"?

De Gaulle's embargo on weapons sales to Israel, maintained by his successor Georges Pompidou after 1969, was a further blow, as France had been Israel's chief supplier of military aircraft—particularly because the Soviet Union moved quickly after the war to replace Egypt's and Syria's air fleets. Worse, France commenced weapons sales to Algeria, Libya, and Iraq. Governmental comments that Israel had become a menace to its neighbors rubbed salt in the wound, especially as Egypt and Syria in particular were still bent on Israel's destruction.

The renewed commitment of Israel's neighbors to destroy it and the shift in France (as well as elsewhere in the West) to seeing the Jewish state as Goliath rather than David were bad enough. Worse was the emergence of Yasser Arafat as the head of the PLO in 1969. Arab armies could be defeated in the field; the rhetoric of the PLO was far more insidious. Its charter denied any Jewish connection to Israel, reducing Israelis to the role of colonialist invaders under the flag of Zionism, which the charter identified as "racist," "fascist," "fanatic," and "expansionist." Claiming all of former British Palestine

west of the Jordan as Palestinian Arab patrimony, the PLO rejected any compromise with Israel and called instead on “peaceful and progressive” forces throughout the world to help in Israel’s destruction. Arafat and other PLO leaders were not, they said, antisemites. They styled themselves part of a secular global liberation movement that included Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Malcolm X, the last of whom said, “We are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.” Arafat looked the part, with his keffiyeh, his fatigues, and his dark sunglasses. In its anti-Zionism, the PLO was backed by the Soviets, who explained that the Jewish state had defeated their Soviet-armed clients only because Zionism was no local affair but an international, imperial conspiracy backed by the World Jewish Congress, which exerted enormous influence on American finance and industry. The whole toxic brew culminated in 1975, with the UN General Assembly’s infamous resolution that “Zionism is a form of racism.”

All of this made perfect sense to French Trotskyists and Maoists. Pro-Palestinian anti-Zionist organizations formed in France after the Six-Day War. They included university students who styled themselves as revolutionaries. Using the language of anti-colonialism still fresh from France’s ill-fated attempt to retain Algeria, these organizations also borrowed the legacy of the French Resistance, neatly turning the Israelis into the Nazis. French keffiyeh-wearing Communists complained of Jewish press control. “Palestine solidarity” events included distribution of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As Jewish writer Gérard Rosenthal put it in early 1970, “The problem of Israel is becoming a national problem.” Israel’s seasoned ambassador Asher Ben-Natan, who arrived in Paris in 1970, noted that relations with France had hit difficulties because “there exists also in France elements that have suddenly adopted anti-Israel attitudes.”



How did France's Jews respond? By asserting their Jewishness without sacrificing their claim to France's promise of universal dignity. "The world," said Meïr Waintrater, the editor of the Jewish monthly *L'Arche*, in April 1970, "only likes dead Jews.... It is impossible today to open a newspaper without finding an article [that] gives Jews advice — which curiously resembles orders — on how to be Jewish or how to be French." Later, in 1977, filmmaker Claude Lanzmann asked, "Why must the Jews feel obligated after Auschwitz to speak in [polite] language? To prove that they are really French? This language... is from the time of Dreyfus! It is the language [from] before the creation of Israel! If we are to protest, I ask that we do so as Jews!"

The chief vehicle of the French-Jewish campaign was the International League against Racism and Antisemitism (LICRA), formed in 1927 in reaction to the dreadful treatment of Jews in Eastern Europe after World War I. After World War II, LICRA countered racism as well, monitoring everything from apartheid in South Africa to the civil rights movement in the United States to the war in Vietnam to the treatment of Arab workers in France. For French Jews, anti-antisemitism and the fight against racism were both part of the struggle for human dignity. LICRA saw no contradiction between opposing racism and advocating the safety of the State of Israel. If the world was divided, it was not between the oppressors and the oppressed. It was divided into those whose rights to safety were respected and those whose rights were not.

LICRA altered its view on de Gaulle. He was still the man who, on June 18, 1940, had called for resistance to the Germans in the name of the universalism France represented. As LICRA president and former Gaullist intelligence officer Jean Pierre-Bloch put it, "We will never forget." But Pierre-Bloch also noted publicly that de Gaulle "is

betraying the Franco-Israeli friendship, not to [help] the Arab people, but to support the potentates who rule these people to their great detriment.” Understanding that the French policy encouraged Arab extremists to hold out for Israel’s destruction rather than work for peace, LICRA also led demonstrations of Jews and non-Jews in Paris and other cities against what Pierre-Bloch called “the scandalous embargo.” Meanwhile LICRA called for a Palestinian state—but without the PLO, whose terror operations disqualified it from any human-rights struggle.

LICRA’s writers, Jews and non-Jews, also tried to expose the antisemitic nature of anti-Zionism in their newspaper *Le Droit de vivre*. Didier Aubourg, who worked for Judeo-Christian amity in France, wrote in March 1970, “Of all the forces that threaten Israel, the Arab armies are far from the most fearsome. The most relentless enemy . . . is indeed antisemitism, the old antisemitism that no longer dares to say its name, but which, rebaptized as anti-Zionism, has never lost its murderous virulence.” Former member of the Resistance, writer, and curator Jean Cassou was more direct. Anti-Zionism, he said, was “a wonderful invention,” because it “allows everyone to be an antisemite in good conscience from now on.”

As for the PLO’s mask of humanism and progressivism, philosopher Anne Matalon noted in the spring of 1968 that “one would be justified in thinking” that the PLO “would recognize . . . the Israeli people.” Instead, the PLO resembled “a capricious child or psychopath” who insisted that history could be turned back. Could the PLO really pose as revolutionary? Jacques Givet, whose family was murdered in Auschwitz and who narrowly escaped death by jumping from a deportation train, said no. “Any apology for al-Fatah, however veiled,” he wrote in March 1969, referring to the PLO’s main group, “is by necessity an apology for genocide.” Unlike the anti-colonial terror in Algiers, Givet argued, “Free Palestine” was little more than a slogan wrapped

in pseudo-revolutionary imagery to justify Israel's destruction and the killing of Jews. François Musard, a member of the Jewish Resistance, identified Palestinian terror as "defiance of the most elementary rules of civilization." It "strikes blindly in theaters, in markets, among innocent populations where their victims are more often women and children. It wants nothing more than 'to kill a Jew.'"



The fundamental question that faced France then, and that faces us again today, was posed by Louis de Villefosse, a French naval officer turned journalist: "How is it that French opinion is not unanimous in its moral support of Israel?" Defending the right of Jews to live, he said, had never meant abandonment of the Palestinian refugee problem. The question had no easy answers. Jewish commentators and their allies viewed the problem as an almost deliberate form of confusion, just as left-wing organizations were quick to disavow antisemitism even while calling for Israel's destruction. But, as Gérard Rosenthal saw in July 1970, such pallid resolutions against antisemitism were not enough "to ensure the disengagement...of antisemitism from anti-Zionism." The search for a just and durable peace in the Middle East demanded vigilance against any revival of antisemitism while demanding "the frank and open condemnation of racism under all of the ornamentation with which it covers itself." And yet it was a frustrating exercise. Everyone knew that "Israel will live" and "Palestine will triumph" were not equivalent slogans; one called for life, the other called for death. The UN's "Zionism is racism" resolution was, for François Musard, "nothing less than a step toward a new final solution." Jean Daniel agreed that the Third World and Communist dream of an Arab Palestine was "on the same level as Hitler's desire to exterminate all the [Jews]."

So here we are again. PLO fanaticism has long been replaced by that of Hamas, a religiously fanatic and far more openly murderous enemy. Hamas has shown unparalleled barbarism, and yet European capitals are packed with pro-Hamas demonstrators who see the murder of some 1,200 Israelis on October 7 as legitimate “resistance,” and American universities are dominated by faculty well-read in gauzy postcolonial theory whose statements against Israel would make French Communists of the 1960s and ’70s blush. Jews, once again, talk to one another in their own publications while academic and prestige publications such as the *New York Review of Books* weigh in with anti-Israeli invective, sometimes even offered by Holocaust scholars who should know better.

We must learn from the example of France’s postwar Jews. They dissected and flatly rejected the linguistic ruses of the day, understanding that the anti-Zionism of the Third World and the European Left was little more than antisemitism cloaked in a different kind of duplicity. They understood that if the French republican ideal truly strove for the dignity of humanity, it could in no circumstances excuse PLO terror, which strove not for human liberation, but for human destruction. They were thus able to locate the balance between a true antiracism that opposed injustice and an unwavering support for Israel’s existence. Most important, they found like-minded allies while speaking up, calling antisemitism out when they saw it, and even breaking with de Gaulle, who was still a hero to the aging former Resistance members among them. But French Jews also understood that there was no silver bullet for antisemitism. The characterization of the Jew as everything from an exploiter to an oppressor to a colonialist to a racist made for a moving target.

This is what we need to do today. We must, at every point, take the rhetoric employed to make Israel seem like the villain and Hamas the victim and show why it is false—and what murderous intent



it elegantly elides. We must explain why anti-Zionism is effectively antisemitism and show how Israel—in sharp contradistinction to Hamas—is fighting its enemy while taking more care of the laws of war than any other military in history. We must insist that there is no situation in which the way Hamas has conducted itself (and is still conducting itself) would be justified, even if the claimed situation were an accurate representation, which it is not. And we must seek every opportunity to impress upon the world that, in fighting against what are effectively anti-civilizational forces, Israel is fighting not merely its own battle but that of all civilized nations.



It will not be easy. But this, too, is not new. Jean Cassou noted in 1969 that the situation called for “extraordinary tenacity,” precisely because antisemitism was a shape-shifting creature. “An antisemite,” he wrote,

will always, in the course of his argument, turn to assure you that he is not an antisemite, but that he is against the Jews; another that he is not against the Jews, but that he is an antisemite; another that he is neither anti-Jewish nor an antisemite, but anti-Zionist; another that he is neither anti-Jewish, nor an antisemite, nor anti-Zionist, but anti-Israeli. He will swear to you that he condemns the crematory ovens but that he would like the complete destruction of Israel. See, we will never be done with it.

For Cassou, the fight demanded that “we have no illusions about anything or anybody,” because the enemy, antisemitism itself, “is the craftiest, the most ferocious of adversaries, and its natural weapon is bad faith.”

It has been 54 years since Cassou wrote these words. The fight continues, demanding, as before, extraordinary tenacity. \*