Anti-Jewish and Anti-Muslim Racisms and the Question of Palestine/Israel

an online publication series edited by Nira Yuval-Davis and Jamie Hakim

Series introduction

Welcome to the 'Anti-Jewish and Anti-Muslim Racisms and the Question of Palestine/Israel' online series, sponsored by the Centre for Research on Migration Refugees and Belonging (CMRB), University of East London; the Runnymede Trust; and the Centre for Palestine Studies, London Middle East Institute, SOAS. This is the first tranche of articles on what we plan to be an ongoing dialogue among scholars and activists differently situated across the globe.

The idea at the root of this online series emerged at the end of 2013 when a group of anti-racist academics and activists met in London to think about the multiple, complex and inter-related ways in which anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racisms are constructed in relation to the question of Palestine/Israel. In particular, we wanted to explore how the histories of Zionist settlement, anti-colonial and nation-building struggles and 20th-century warfare in the Middle East region were being transformed in the current historical conjuncture – especially in Britain and Europe, but also globally – and how these related to racialised discourses against Jews and Muslims. The group decided to bring together specialists from a variety of backgrounds, organising conferences that would serve as a first step towards building an anti-racist political vision across borders and boundaries (a vision which some of us call 'transversal'[1]). The aim was to destabilise some of the oppositional dichotomies which are currently hegemonic in discourses around Jews, Muslims and Middle East politics. We held a small, invitation-only conference in December 2013 at LSE and then organised a large, international conference at SOAS in February 2015, that was open to the general public. The sponsors of these conferences were some of the best known academic and civic organizations working on issues of racism, human rights and social change – the University of East London's Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging; the Runnymede Trust; LSE's Centre for the Study of Human Rights; the Open University's Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change; and SOAS's Centre for Palestine Studies (London Middle East Institute).

It would be impossible to sum up the rich tapestry of presentations and discussions from both conferences (which were recorded and are available on the CMRB website). Instead, in this introduction, we will reflect on a couple of the major issues that arose in them in order to give an overview of some of the concerns that informed what we plan to publish in this online series. We are

very conscious that in doing so we are not reflecting any common perspective of the organisers and participants of the conferences and the contributors to this series. No such common perspective exists, at least for now. The project has been full of disagreements and contestations at every stage, with many of us being forced out of our comfort zones at times, engaging with material that was far from reflecting what we agree with and representing the issues in terms acceptable to us. Nevertheless, we do believe that the discussions in both conferences were framed in a way that kept the overall anti-racist framework at the forefront of the debates. For this reason alone we consider this project a first step in the right direction.

Racisms and anti-racism

Before discussing some of the major issues that arose, we need to clarify, in a brief and generic way, what we mean when we describe the perspective of the conferences as anti-racist. Racism and constructions of 'race' are not the same. When we discuss racism we focus on people's experiences of perceptions and practices which construct immutable boundaries between groupings of people, that naturalise fixed hierarchical power relations between them. It is not just physical appearance which can make people the target of racism. Any signifier of boundaries can be used to construct these boundaries – from the colour of the skin to the shape of the nose, to accent, mode of dress, ethnic origin or religious affiliation. Racism has two generic logics: that of exclusion – the ultimate form of which is genocide, and that of exploitation – the ultimate logic of which is slavery. However, in most concrete historical situations these two logics are practiced in a complementary way.

Racisms against Jews and Muslims, therefore, are based on ideological, economic, violent and other kinds of social constructions of inferiorisation and subjugation, which facilitate the exclusion and/or the exploitation of Jews and Muslims. However, not being racist towards Jews or Muslims does not mean an automatic acceptance and agreement of any religious beliefs or particular political and normative values and projects, which consider or introduce themselves as representing the 'true' Jew or Judaism, or the 'true' Muslim or Islam. It is important to remember that both Jews and Muslims can occupy different places in the continuum between being very religious to fully secular and, even when religious, can believe in many different versions of the religion. Also, being a target of racist ideologies and practices does not necessarily mean that people are not racist themselves. It is for this reason that we prefer to label our subject topic 'anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racisms' rather than the more popular labels (used, alas, also by many of our contributors) of antisemitism, a label used historically towards non-Jews (as we elaborate further in this introduction) and Islamophobia, which does not differentiate between attitudes towards different types of Muslim and Islam.

However, one of the useful insights that has emerged out of this project is that we need to differentiate not only between the people and the religion, but also between aversion or intolerance towards the religion as such (e.g. the Swiss law forbidding building Muslim minerats for 'aesthetic' reasons, or objections to Muslim women wearing a headscarf) and critiques of racist and sexist ideologies and practices which are presented as the 'only true way' to be a Muslim or a Jew. All religions and all

sacred texts constitute rich cultural resources, which include internal contradictions and selective interpretations of the religion. Every ideological and political religious movement uses a particular interpretation of the religion as its legitimation. Criticising them – whether one is born to that religious community or not, whether one is religious or not – has nothing to do with racism. On the contrary, conflating the two by seeing any critique of a particular interpretation as automatically aimed against all Jews or Muslims, homogenises both the people and the religion and can only legitimise racism on the one hand and religious fundamentalism on the other.

Although at the conferences – let alone outside them – there have been attempts to 'quantify' whether there is more racism contemporarily, especially in the UK and Europe, against Jews or Muslims, against Judaism or Islam and, conversely, in the name of which religion more atrocities are being practiced these days, we resist this tendency, prevalent in identity politics, that some of us call 'the Oppression Olympics'. There is no doubt that given the differential size of Jewish and Muslim populations globally (and in Britain) we cannot compare the two. However, there have been murderous racist activities in recent years towards members of both religious and ethnic communities, as well as murderous racist activities carried out by fundamentalists in the name of both religions. This does not mean that we equate or homogenise the two. Indeed, one of the particularities of recent Islamic fundamentalisms is that their violence is disproportionately directed towards other people of Muslim origins rather than just against the 'kofers'.

The Palestine/Israel question

Another central discussion at the conferences related to the Palestine/Israel question, both historically and in relation to a desired solution to the conflict. We would argue (and many, but not all, of the participants in the conferences would agree with this) that Zionism needs to be understood as a nationalist movement which originally sought to 'normalise' the Jewish people and thus solve the racialisation of the Jews in European modern history. To do this, however, the Zionist movement used the strategy of a settler colonial project in Palestine as the main instrument for achieving for the Jews a state that claimed to represent the Jews all over the world. The Zionist settler colonial project has continued during the last 100 years, before and after the establishment of the state in 1948, before and after the 1967 Occupation. While doing so, in order to confront and overcome the Arab and especially the Palestinian resistance to this project, Israel has become a society of permanent war.

Settler society projects differ from other colonial projects in that their basic mechanism of governability has been via the racialised exclusion of the local population from the new nation building project, rather than incorporating them as the new national working class, as was the case of immigrant workers from a less 'desirable' ethnic origin than the hegemonic settler communities.[2] (This does not mean, of course, that where possible the indigenous population were not exploited as cheap labour). Zionism, like all settler society projects has its own specificities, the two main ones being that, firstly, unlike other Western settler societies, the Zionist movement did not have one clear 'mother country' but rather sought alliance with whatever imperial power controlled Palestine at the time and, secondly,

that unlike other settler projects dominated by religious aspirations to build 'new Jerusalems', the Zionist movement sought legitimation in claiming the 'new Jerusalem' territory in Palestine as the homeland of their 'Old Jerusalem'. This proved to be a forceful motivational power for mobilising Jews to immigrate to their 'Altneuland' (old-new country – to use Herzl's name for the utopian society he dreamed of building in Palestine). It also acted, in its common sense link to Christian evangelism, as another source of legitimation of Zionism in the Western world, in addition to the naturalisation of European colonialism and, later on, the aftermath of Nazi Holocaust. One common assumption to some versions of Zionism and anti-Jewish racism (as expressed so eloquently by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu recently, post-Charlie Hebdo and the subsequent events in Copenhagen) is that Jews do not belong and should not live in the same societies as non-Jews.

One of the questions debated in the conferences was the extent to which Israel should be a Jewish state or a state of all its citizens (more than 20 per cent of all Israeli citizens, even if we do not count the post-1967 Occupied Territories under the control of the Israeli government, are not Jews). Although all of the participants in the conferences (at least, those who spoke) objected to the proposed Israeli law which would define Israel as a Jewish state, rather than a Jewish and democratic state, some argued that Jews, like all nations, have the right to self determination. On the other hand, those who view Israel as a settler society state rather than a 'normal' nation-state, pointed out that in all settler societies that have come to terms with their history, the construction of 'the nation' has not been that of a particular national, religious or racial group but that of all its citizens.

For many years, before and after the establishment of the Israeli state, the dispossession and expulsion of the Palestinians, as individuals and as a national collectivity, were almost completely invisible to the West and, to a large extent, are still in the process of gaining primacy. Originally, the Palestinian national movement – like other Arab national movements – was aimed against both the Ottoman Empire and British colonial power, before focusing on Zionism and Israel, which gradually became a regional and then global symbol of Western colonial oppression and an invasion of the post-colonial South. The notion of so-called 'Judeo-Christian civilisation' has played a central role here – a very late invention, which ignores the fact that Jewish and Muslim religious practices have much more in common than Judaism and Christianity and that anti-Jewish racism has been much more prevalent in Christian than Muslim history.

Another issue that arose at the conferences was the rise of a sub-altern, anti-Western 'common sense', in which the critique of the local, regional and global role of Israel has been transformed into racialised attitudes to Jews, wherever they are and whatever their engagement was with the Zionist project, globally but especially in the South. One of the symptoms of this, but most probably also one of its causes, is the popularity in many Southern locations, such as the Indian sub-continent, of Nazi and other antisemitic publications (from *Mein Kampf* to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*). Since World War Two these publications have been forbidden in the West (although the copyrights are due to expire next year, which might have some significant consequences), but not outside Europe and North America. The unwavering support of western powers for Israel and its policies has contributed to the

conflation of Israel and the West. The conflation between Israel and the Jews has been helped by the notion of the 'new antisemitism', according to which any critique of Israel and its policy of occupation is antisemitic. This has had, we would argue, the effect of constructing a 'common sense' predicated on the self-defeating logic that if any critique of Israeli policy is 'antisemitic', then maybe antisemitism is not such a bad thing.

Another factor in this equation, which was highlighted at the conferences, is the way the extreme Right in the West has used a pro-Israeli stance to 'prove' that they are respectable and 'not racist', whatever their stance against 'the Muslims' who are 'taking over' Europe (although, under this veneer, old antisemitic positions often emerge). This has also been the case with pro-Israeli positions of the Christian Right. It was also pointed out that pro-Israeli lobbies and organisations are engaged, together with pro-Hindutva organizations in a global campaign against Muslims. However, as was discussed by Chetan Bhatt during the LSE conference, where Salafism is concerned pro-Israeli lobbies often single out the anti-semitic elements in Salafist and other Islamist discourses, when these appear in much wider hate discourses in which Israel and Jews are but one element. Absurdly, when the Shia are the main target of Sunni Salafi antagonism, for example, Israel and the USA are mentioned as part of the global Shia axis starting from Iran. In other words, both anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish racisms have become part of legitimising discourses of global clashes, between the West and the South, Islamist and other religious political projects and even clashes within Islamist political projects, as well as part of daily 'common sense' constructions everywhere in a time of global crisis, expressing insecurity against 'the Other', 'the terrorist', 'the usurper'. And the Palestine/Israel question has helped to encourage these conflations and racialisations.

The online series

The aim of this online discussion series is to start a forum for activists and academics to engage in an open-ended and constructive dialogue on all the interrelated issues we have just described. We will continue to consider all relevant articles submitted to us indefinitely, in order to embrace different anti-racist perspectives as fully as possible, so that we can keep up to date with a political situation which is both seemingly interminable and also changing every day.

The first tranche of articles that we are publishing are all based on papers delivered at one of the conferences. Three of them deal with what their authors call antisemitism. As already explained, we decided against using this word for various reasons. The tensions within the term are explored in a fascinatingly provocative article called: 'The idea of Jewish antisemitism and recuperating the "Semites"' by Annabelle Sreberny, which she concludes with the idea that after the 'Charlie Hebdo' attacks a better mode of identification might have been 'Je suis un Semite', rather than the iconic 'Je suis Charlie'. Tony Lerman explores related issues around the politics of the new antisemitism, as defined by the now defunct EU Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, which elides criticism of the State of Israel with what is conventionally understood as antisemitism. Helga Embacher and Jan Rybak explore the political complexities that have produced one branch of the so-called new

antisemitism: Muslim antisemitism, specifically in Austria around the time of the Gaza conflict of 2014. Meanwhile, Keith Kahn-Harris looks at different factors that stimulate conflict within the British Jewish community with regards to Israel. In Stefano Bellin's contribution, he interrelates the work of Hannah Arendt, Edward Said and Enzo Traverso in an attempt to offer a new way of thinking through some of the ongoing hurdles which are preventing a just resolution to the conflict. Finally, Hilary Aked produces a forceful and forensic analysis of how pro-Israel organisations fund Islamophobic propaganda.

Clearly these articles are not the last word on these issues, nor are they intended to be. We welcome contributions on all aspects of the intersections between anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racisms and the question of Palestine/Israel (please email them to j.hakim@uel.ac.uk). We argue that thinking through these issues all together and at the same time – and always from within an anti-racist normative framework – is an important step towards resisting some of the injustices carried out by so many on all sides of the conflict.

Notes

[1] See: C. Cockburn and L. Hunter, 'Transversal politics and translating practices', *Soundings* (special issue on Transversal Politics) 12 (Summer), 1999; N. Yuval-Davis, 'Women, ethnicity and empowerment', in *Feminism and Psychology*, 4(1), 1994, 179-197; N. Yuval-Davis, 'Human/women's rights and feminist transversal politics', in M. Marx Ferree and A. M. Tripp (eds), *Transnational Feminisms: Women's Global Activism and Human Rights*, New York, New York University Press, 2007.

[2] D. Stasiulis and N. Yuval-Davis (eds), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class,* London, Sage, 1995.

Biographical note

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