

Antisemitism, Anti-Judaism, and Anti-Israel Sentiments | Understanding the Complexities

by Wolfgang Geissler



Introduction

Antisemitism is a global issue that has been prevalent for centuries. It is a form of discrimination against Jewish people and is often characterized by hatred, prejudice, and violence. As an introduction, we will explore the differences between antisemitism in Austria and Great Britain.

According to the Federal Ministry of the Interior [in Austria](#), there has been a rise in antisemitic attacks since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. The Jewish community in Vienna has reported 167 incidents in just the past three weeks, which is a significant increase for a small Jewish population of around 12,000. Austrian authorities have raised the country's terrorism alert level to "high" since October 18 and have increased protection of local Jewish institutions. On the other hand, Great Britain has a long history of antisemitism.

The issue of antisemitism [in Great Britain](#) was summarized in 2018 by former British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who died in 2020, with the following words: "Britain was the world leader in antisemitism before the expulsion of its Jewish citizens." (In 1290, Edward I issued a royal decree ordering the banishment of all Jewish residents of England. This made Great Britain the first European country to expel its Jewish population.) Since the return of Jewish people to Britain in the 17th century, however, the country had become "a world leader in tolerance," Sacks believed. Despite this, the country has seen a significant increase in antisemitic attacks in recent years. The Antisemitic Incidents Report 2021 shows that in 2021, there were 2,255 anti-Jewish hate incidents reported across the country, which is the highest annual total ever recorded by the Community Security Trust (CST).

Antisemitism

This term coined in the late 19th century, refers to hostility, prejudice, or discrimination against Jewish people based on their ethnicity, religion, or culture. However, it's vital to differentiate between antisemitism, anti-Judaism, and anti-Israel sentiments, as they encompass distinct aspects but often intertwine within societal perceptions and discussions. Throughout history, Jewish communities have faced persecution, discrimination, and violence. From the medieval era's religiously motivated accusations of blood libel and expulsions from various European countries to the horrors of the Holocaust during World War II, antisemitism has manifested in numerous forms, deeply ingrained in societies worldwide.

Anti-Judaism: Religious Prejudice

Anti-Judaism, rooted in religious differences and theological beliefs, predates the term "antisemitism". It revolves around opposition to Jewish religious practices, beliefs, and their rejection as the "chosen people" in religious narratives. Historically, it led to marginalization, segregation, and discrimination against Jewish communities, often justified by misconceptions and religious biases.

Anti-Israel Sentiments: Political and Geopolitical Perspectives

Anti-Israel sentiments involve criticism, opposition, or hostility toward the state of Israel's policies, actions, or existence. These sentiments can arise from geopolitical conflicts, territorial disputes, or disagreements over Israeli government policies regarding Palestine. Criticism of Israel's actions, while rooted in political stances, can sometimes cross into anti-Semitic rhetoric or unfairly target Jewish individuals for policies they might not support or identify with.

The Complex Interplay

The complexities emerge when these notions intersect. Criticizing Israeli government policies doesn't necessarily constitute antisemitism or anti-Judaism. However, when criticism descends into stereotyping Jews as controlling governments or global finance, denying the Holocaust, or using anti-Jewish tropes to vilify Israelis, it crosses into anti-Semitic territory. Similarly, opposing Israel's policies doesn't inherently imply hatred toward Jewish people, but it can sometimes be used as a shield for anti-Semitic beliefs or sentiments. Hence, it's crucial to separate valid political critique from prejudice rooted in hate.

The Rise of Zionism

Zionism emerged in the late 19th century as a political and nationalist movement aimed at establishing a Jewish homeland. The movement was a response to the growing antisemitism in Europe and the rise of nationalism, with Jews facing discrimination, persecution, and pogroms in various parts of Europe.

Theodor Herzl, an Austro-Hungarian journalist and playwright, is considered the father of modern political Zionism. He became a prominent figure after witnessing the rampant antisemitism in France during the Dreyfus Affair. The Dreyfus Affair, which occurred in France from 1894 to 1906, centered around Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French army officer who was falsely accused and convicted of treason. Despite lack of evidence, Dreyfus was scapegoated primarily because of his Jewish heritage. The affair revealed deep-seated antisemitism within French society and the government, and it sparked public debate and division.

Herzl, influenced by the injustices of the Dreyfus Affair, became convinced that the only solution to antisemitism was for Jews to have their own homeland. In 1896, he published his influential book, "Der Judenstaat" ("The Jewish State"), where he articulated the need for a Jewish state to ensure the safety and freedom of the Jewish people. Interestingly, he did not proclaim a Jewish state in Palestine, but was thinking of other regions, where this nation in "Diaspora", spread all over the world, would find peace. It was only by 1917, when the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, the so-called "Balfour Declaration", which reads "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment *in Palestine* of a national home for the Jewish people" – written that initiating the "big bang" of the migration movement of Jews worldwide to their old homeland of Palestine.

Zionism, however, has often been mischaracterized and used as a pretext for antisemitism. Some individuals and groups have falsely accused Jews of having dual loyalties or using Zionism as a cover for manipulating global affairs. This conflation of Zionism with antisemitism is a form of bigotry that aims to delegitimize the Jewish right to self-determination and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Jewish people. It's crucial to distinguish between legitimate criticism of Israeli policies and actions and the prejudiced views that equate Zionism with antisemitism. Not all criticism of Israel or support for Palestinian rights is inherently antisemitic. However, using Zionism as a code for antisemitism perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the marginalization of Jewish people.

Understanding the historical context of Zionism, Theodor Herzl's vision, and the complexities of the Dreyfus Affair is essential to comprehend the intertwined dynamics of Jewish identity, nationalism, and the ongoing struggle against antisemitism.

Addressing Misconceptions and Promoting Understanding

Combatting antisemitism, anti-Judaism, and anti-Israel sentiments involves education, dialogue, and the promotion of mutual understanding. It's imperative to distinguish between criticism of policies, religious differences, and hateful ideologies that propagate discrimination against Jewish individuals or the Jewish state.

Promoting education about Jewish history, culture, and contributions, fostering interfaith dialogue, and encouraging peaceful resolutions to geopolitical conflicts are essential steps toward mitigating these prejudices.

Conclusion

Antisemitism, anti-Judaism, and anti-Israel sentiments are multifaceted issues shaped by historical, religious, and geopolitical factors. Understanding the nuances and intersections between these concepts is crucial in fostering a more inclusive and tolerant society that values diversity and respects the rights of all individuals, irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, or nationality.

Austria's role

Austria, like many countries around the world, acknowledges its historical responsibility towards Israel and the Jewish people due to its role in the Holocaust and the atrocities committed against Jews during World War II. Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938, and during that time, many Austrians were involved in the persecution and murder of Jews. Recognizing this dark past, Austria has taken steps to address its historical responsibility. The country has implemented various measures, including educational programmes, commemorative events, and financial reparations, to remember the victims of the Holocaust and to educate current and future generations about the horrors of that period.

Additionally, Austria maintains diplomatic relations with Israel and often emphasizes the importance of bilateral ties and cooperation between the two countries. This partnership encompasses various areas such as politics, economics, culture, and technology.

Austria's responsibility toward Israel and the Jewish people involves ongoing efforts to combat antisemitism, promote tolerance and understanding, support Holocaust education, and maintain a strong commitment to human rights. It's crucial for Austria to continue these efforts to ensure that the atrocities of the past are never forgotten and to foster a future based on mutual respect and peace.

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!



About the author

Wolfgang Geissler is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, its Treasurer and a Committee Member of the United Kingdom Citizens in Europe. He has lived and worked for 40 years in the United Kingdom.

The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the views of the ABS.