

Challenging Antisemitism and Islamophobia together

Nasar Meer



It would appear that some commentators want us to believe that antisemitism began with reaction to the bloody conflicts in the occupied territories. Such is the anxiety that protests against Israeli policies have raised, the Spectator's Douglas Murray recently described those people who marched in national rallies against the war in Gaza as '[t]housands of anti-Semites [sic]'.¹

Activists and academics with a track record of working collaboratively to tackle antisemitism invariably have no truck with somebody who has demanded that 'conditions for Muslims must be made harder across the board'.² It is nonetheless worrying that challenging antisemitism is deemed fertile ground for self-proclaimed Islamophobes³ - a position that is not entirely dissimilar to how antisemitic activities are undertaken in the name of Palestinian solidarity.⁴ In each case the strategy of Islamophobes and antisemites is to place both forms of racism against each other and ignore how they are related.

Recent elections in Hungary saw about 20% of voters back an openly antisemitic party, whilst the openly Islamophobic Swiss People's Party polled over 26%, and France's Front National (buoyed by

recent advances in the French general election) have renewed their mobilisations against a series of small accommodations for France's Jews and Muslims. These electoral expressions of antipathy toward both Jewish and Muslims minorities in Europe have not occurred in a vacuum, however, or independently of public opinion.

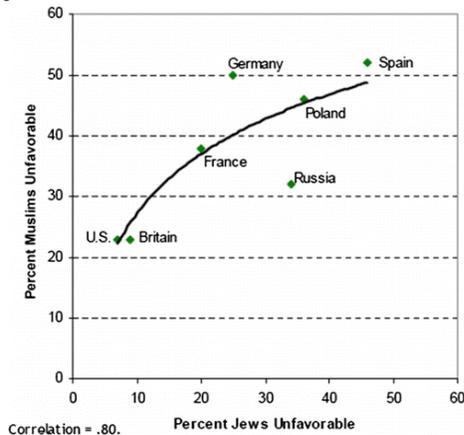
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One of the best available data sets offering a statistical comparison of attitudes towards Jews and Muslims can be found in the Pew Global Attitudes Project (PGAP),⁵ which surveyed almost 25,000 people across 24 countries. Among its findings, it reports:

A strong relationship between anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sentiments in the West. Indeed, among the U.S. and the six European countries included in the survey, the correlation between unfavorable opinions of Jews and unfavorable opinions of Muslims is remarkably high.⁶

As Figure 1 shows, the expression of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish attitudes emerges not separately but instead as a conjoined activity (the fuller data show quite persuasively how antipathy towards Muslims and Jews increases and decreases by consistent percentages over the same intervals).

Figure 1: “Negative Views of Jews and Muslims in the West”



Source: *Pew Global Attitudes Project*⁷

As my colleagues and I discuss in a new book, [Racialization and Religion: Race, Culture and Difference in the Study of Antisemitism and Islamophobia](#), this is at least one of two ways of thinking about the ‘scale’ of the problem of antisemitic and Islamophobic attitudes. The first refers to the frequency of antisemitism and Islamophobia, but a second approach is more geopolitical in describing the European landscape in which they occur. For example, the PGAP survey reports that negative attitudes to Jewish minorities had more than doubled in Spain over the previous three years, with a rise from 21% to 46%, and that more than one in three Poles and Russians also held unfavourable opinions of Jews. In the same period antisemitism also rose from 21% to 25% in Germany and from 12% to 20% in France.

Even in Britain, where extreme right-wing political parties have never flourished in the sorts of ways familiar on the continent, partly due to an electoral system that squeezes out smaller parties, survey evidence compiled by Clive Field reports that hostility to British Jews continues to exist and often stems from the view that ‘the loyalty of British Jews to Israel transcends their allegiance to Britain’.⁸

Such findings have been added to others in support of the view that Britain too is not free from antisemitic episodes. The Community Security Trust (CST) recorded 304 antisemitic incidents across the UK in

the first six months of 2014, ‘an increase of 36 per cent from the 223 antisemitic incidents recorded in the first six months of 2013’.⁹ Indeed, the CST recorded ‘312 antisemitic incidents in the first six months of 2012, 294 in the first half of 2011 and 325 in the first half of 2010’. These incidents include cases of extreme violence, assault, damage and desecration of property, threats and abusive behaviour.¹⁰ Such ongoing concerns have resulted in a high-profile All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism.¹¹ Public and media discussion of this inquiry has also reflected the concerns of leading Jewish spokespeople and intellectuals.¹²

The same Pew data, meanwhile, reported that opinions of Muslims in almost all of the 24 European countries surveyed were more negative than they were of Jews, with more than half of Spaniards and half of Germans stating that they did not like Muslims, while the figures for Poland and France were 46% and 38% for those holding unfavourable opinions of Muslims. Indeed, while Americans and Britons displayed the lowest levels of antisemitism, one in four in both countries was hostile to Muslims. This means that in the USA, France and Germany, unfavourable views of Muslims are roughly at twice the rate of unfavourable views of Jews, while in Poland and Spain the former are only a few percentage points more.

While quantitative surveys do not always provide the best accounts of prejudice and discrimination, they can be useful in discerning trends – alerting us in this case to the widespread prevalence of anti-Muslim feeling. In the last British Attitudes Survey, for example, Voas and Ling report that one fifth of the total population responds negatively only to Muslims, and that relatively few people feel unfavourable towards any other religious or ethnic group on its own.¹³ Across Europe meanwhile, Zick, Küpper and Hövermann conclude:

[I]t is conspicuous that Europeans are largely united in their rejection of Muslims and Islam. The significantly most widespread anti-Muslim attitudes are found in Germany, Hungary, Italy and Poland, closely followed by France, Great Britain and the Netherlands. The extent of anti-Muslim attitudes is least in Portugal. In ab-

solute terms, however, the eight countries [Britain, France, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Hungary] differ little in their levels of prejudice towards Muslims.¹⁴

The visibility of Muslims, in terms of sometimes distinctive dress and appearance, is frequently the means through which Islamophobic feeling is turned into Islamophobic behaviour.¹⁵ A good European-wide illustration may be found in the summary report on Islamophobia published by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia shortly after 9/11. Its authors, Chris Allen and Jorgen Nielsen, identified a rise in the number of 'physical and verbal threats being made, particularly to those visually identifiable as Muslims, especially towards women wearing the hijab'.¹⁶ What is of particular note is that despite variations in the number and correlation of physical and verbal threats directed at Muslim populations among the individual nation states, one overarching feature that emerged among the 15 EU countries was the tendency for *Muslim women* to be attacked because of how the *hijab* signifies an Islamic identity.¹⁷

It is a finding that raises problems for people who want to distinguish between antipathy towards Muslims and antipathy towards Islam. What is common to such findings is that these are *overlapping* and *interacting* – rather than distinct – something that can be illustrated further in the attitude polling of non-Muslim Britons one year after 9/11, in which attitudes towards religious doctrine, practitioners of a religion and violent extremism are intertwined. For example, Field reports that:

There could be little doubt that 9/11 had taken some toll. Views of Islam since 9/11 were more negative for 47%, and of Britain's Muslims for 35% (almost three times the first post-9/11 figure). [...] Dislike for Islam was expressed by 36%, three in four of whom were fearful of what it might do in the next few years. One quarter rejected the suggestion that Islam was mainly a peaceful religion, with terrorists comprising only a tiny minority...¹⁸

If these examples and the preceding discussion suggest a number of confusions over racial versus religious antipathy towards Muslims and Islam, then

this is not unique to the conceptualization of anti-Muslim sentiment – as debates concerning racism and other religious minorities highlight: not least with respect to antisemitism.

Then there is the second issue of 'scale' that goes beyond frequency per se and relates directly to the US political anthropologist Matti Bunzl's observation, that we have progressed from the 'Jewish question' that haunted the continent throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, which cyclically facilitated episodes of persecution and genocide.¹⁹ In contrast there is evidence to suggest that from the perspective of today being Jewish and being European are not deemed mutually exclusive.²⁰ Of course this does not mean that European societies are free from antisemitism. Far from it! The point instead is that while Jews have historically been accused of 'interfering' with the alleged 'purity' of nation states, from the vantage point of a supranational Europe, Jewish minorities are deemed less of a 'threat' (but not entirely unthreatening). That is, they have moved on from being the perpetual 'historical outsiders'; as Bunzl notes:

Consider Europe's realities against the backdrop of antisemitism's political project. That project sought to secure the purity of the ethnic nation-state, a venture that has become obsolete in the supranational context of the European Union. There, Jews no longer figure as the principal Other but as the veritable embodiment of the post national order.

Whether or not Bunzl is too optimistic is matter of debate,²¹ but the problematic he identifies raises a significant question for the fate of Muslims in Europe. For according to Valéry Giscard d'Estang (former president of France and head of the Convention on the Future of Europe which drafted the Lisbon Treaty), the status of Muslims is more uncertain because they have 'a different culture, a different approach, a different way of life'.²² Pertinent here is the late Pim Fortuyn's insistence on the need to defend European 'Judeo-Christian humanistic culture' and the ways in which he characterized Judaism as 'a creative and constructive element in society'.²³ Or as his most natural heir Geert Wilders has it, as long as Europe is unwilling to defend 'the

ideas of Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem', it will 'lose everything: our cultural identity, our democracy, our rule of law, our liberties, our freedom'. Tellingly, Jean Marie Le Pen previously characterized himself as the defender of European Jewry, arguing that 'the Jews understand who is truly responsible for antisemitism'.²⁴ Such sentiments may be contrasted with the same European political parties' attitudes towards Muslims. See, for example, statements made by the Austrian Freedom party on the prospect of Turkey's accession to the EU, the Flemish Interest/Flemish Block's statement that 'Islam is now the no. 1 enemy not only of Europe but of the world', as well as Front National literature on the 'Islamization of France'.²⁵

In the present climate, roughly two-thirds of respondents in Western Europe (ranging from 59% in Belgium to 70% in Denmark) perceive greater cooperation with the Muslim world as a threat.²⁶ It is in this context that the charter of *Cities Against Islamization* has risen to warn that the 'fast demographic increase of the Islamic population in the West threatens to result in an Islamic majority in Western European cities in a few decades'.²⁷ This is the language of 'Eurabia'. Sometimes sourced to the interventions of the controversial polemicist Bat Ye'or,²⁸ the notion of 'Eurabia' invokes the spectre of the numerical and cultural domination of Europe by Muslims and Islam. It is a reading that has not gone

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undisputed on the grounds that it both radically over estimates base figures and then extrapolates implausible levels of population growth.²⁹

The demography panic has nonetheless achieved a degree of traction that bears the chilling hallmarks of recent European history. It is clear that both Islamophobia and antisemitism draw on similar tropes of race, culture and belonging. As such they are not limited to hostility to a religion alone, but are tied up with pressing issues of community identity, stereotyping, socio-economic location, and political conflict amongst other dynamics. In this regard Muslim and Jewish minorities have a clear and pressing

rationale for collaborating further and tackling both together.

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His recent publications include *Key Concepts in Race and Ethnicity* (2014 Sage) and the edited volume: *Racialization and Religion* (2013 Routledge).

¹ <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2014/07/london-s-pro-palestine-rally-was-a-disgusting-anti-semitic-spectacle/>

² <http://web.archive.org/web/20080201133647/http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk/blog/archives/000809.php>

³ <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/douglas-murray/2014/02/what-do-i-need-to-do-to-become-islamophobe-of-the-year/>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/0/8/dont-tell-me-what-think-about-israel>

⁵ PRC (Pew Research Center) (2008) *Pew Global Attitudes Project: Unfavorable Views of Jews and Muslims on the Increase in Europe*. Washington DC: PRC. Summary available from:

<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=262>

⁶ Ibid. 9.

⁷ <http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/09/17/chapter-1-views-of-religious-groups/>

⁸ Field, C. D. 2007. Islamophobia in contemporary Britain: the evidence of the opinion polls, 1988–2006. *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 18(4): 447–77.

⁹ <http://www.thecst.org.uk/docs/Incidents%20Report%20Jan%20-%20June%202014.pdf>

¹⁰ See CST anti-Semitic incidents reports (2010), available from:

<http://www.thecst.org.uk/docs/Incidents%20Report%20010.pdf>

¹¹ APPIA (All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism) 2006 *Report of the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism*, London: HMSO.

¹² See 'The War on Britain's Jews', Channel 4, 9th July 2007. Islamophobia, meanwhile, according to a number of surveys, has also risen. Compiled by Field (2007, Appendix I pp. 472–5).

¹³ Voas, D. and Ling, R. 2010. "Religion in Britain and the United States". In *British Social Attitudes: The 26th Report*, Edited by: Park, A. 65–86. London: SAGE. p. 80-1.

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- ¹⁴ Zick , A. , Kupper , B. and Hövermann , A. 2011 *Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination* , Berlin : Forum Berlin. Available from: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/do/07908-20110311.pdf> pp. 62-3).
- ¹⁵ Meer, N., Dwyer, C. and Modood, T. 2010. Embodying nationhood? Conceptions of British national identity, citizenship and gender in the “veil affair”. *The Sociological Review*, 58(1): 84–111.
- ¹⁶ Allen, C. and Nielsen, J. S. 2002. *Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU15 after 11 September 2001*, Vienna: European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia, p. 16).
- ¹⁷ p. 35.
- ¹⁸ Field, C. D. 2007. Islamophobia in contemporary Britain: the evidence of the opinion polls, 1988–2006. *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 18(4): 447–77. p. 455.
- ¹⁹ Bunzl M. 2007 *Antisemitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe* , Chicago, IL : Prickly Paradigm Press.
- ²⁰ Benbassa , E. 2007 ‘Xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism: Europe’s recurring evils?’ M. Bunzl Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia , Chicago : Prickly Press.
- ²¹ Werbner, P. 2005. Islamophobia: incitement to religious hatred – legislating for a new fear? *Anthropology Today*, 21(1): 5–9.
- ²² Bunzl M. 2007 *Antisemitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe* , Chicago , IL : Prickly Paradigm Press, p. 32.
- ²³ Ibid. p. 38.
- ²⁴ Ibid. 32.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ WEF (World Economic Forum) 2008 *Islam and the West: Annual Report on the State of Dialogue*, Geneva: WEF, p. 139.
- ²⁷ <http://www.citiesagainstislamisation.com>
- ²⁸ Ye’or B (2001) *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*. Madison, NJ, Fairleigh: Dickinson University Press; Ye’or B (2005) *Eurabia: the Euro-Arab axis*. Madison, NJ, Fairleigh: Dickinson University Press.
- ²⁹ Meer, N. (2012) ‘Misrecognising Muslim consciousness in Europe’, *Ethnicities*, 12 (2), pp: 178-197.