

# Antisemitism: Realities, Denial and Instrumentalization

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Antisemitism resurfaces with every crisis: the Covid-19 health crisis, the wars between Palestine and Israel, migratory, economic and social “crises,” and so on.

While they have deep roots in the Christian world, in the Muslim world they have a more contrasting history of tolerance and discrimination – the dhimmi status of Jews, shared with Christians, established protection but also a specific tax and unequal rights as compared to Muslims – anti-Judaism and anti-semitism do not fall within a continuum.

Prejudices do seem to mutate identically from one period and region to another, but they are not the eternal return of the same thing: the issue needs to be contextualized in space and time. In Europe, for instance, from the 19th century onwards, nationalism and then racial ideologies gave rise to an anti-semitism that was not religious but political, leading to the destruction of the Jews of Europe. In the Muslim world, successive crises, colonization, decolonization, nationalism and the creation of the State of Israel considerably altered interfaith relations, leading to the mass departure of Jewish communities.

It is therefore not easy to decipher the current nature of antisemitism, to analyse its denial and to criticize its exploitation, sometimes to the benefit of the State of Israel, any criticism of which, according to its defenders, constitutes antisemitism. Too much confusion reigns, fuelled by intellectuals acting in bad faith, whether they brandish the accusation of anti-semitism against those who support Palestine or hide their antisemitism behind insincere support for colonized peoples.

In the context of globalization, the real breeding ground for antisemitism, which is most often conspiracy-theory-oriented, is globality and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the planet's ills. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be a trigger, but it is not the only factor explaining contemporary antisemitism, which has many underlying layers that need to be detected and identified.

## Should the Law Define Antisemitism?

The various Member States and the European Union are currently faced with a proposal to define anti-semitism that is both unnecessary and dangerous. In France, the Freedom of the Press Act, which dates back to 28 July 1881 and has constitutional status, should be supplemented, according to the advocates of this idea.

This approach is in line with the definition proposed by the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance), which is not only particularly inadequate and vague, but also uses examples such as “denying Jews the right to self-determination” or “excessive criticism of the State of Israel” without being able to define what precisely is meant.

While it is true that anti-Zionism is sometimes a mask for antisemitism, this cannot be generalized: on the contrary – and this is the role of the courts – the context and the overall discourse allow us to distinguish a political opinion from the expression of racism.

At least 31 countries, primarily in the European Union, have now adopted this definition, which has also inspired the European Union's strategy to combat antisemitism. Human rights organizations, however, have widely warned of the risks of criminalizing support for Palestine and have generally supported the Jerusalem Declaration, which is based on the work

of researchers. The core definition of the Jerusalem Declaration is as follows:

*“Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or against Jewish institutions as Jewish).”*

The authors give examples of classic antisemitism. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they consider it antisemitic to hold Jews collectively responsible for Israel’s conduct or to accuse them of dual loyalty. On the other hand, they consider that it is not antisemitic to oppose Zionism as a form of nationalism or to advocate actions of boycott, divestment or sanctions against the State of Israel.

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In France, the new bill to separate the struggle against antisemitism from the press law has been denounced not only by human rights organizations but also by legal experts who are not necessarily opposed to Zionism but who are defenders of freedoms. Isolating the fight against antisemitism from the fight against all forms of racism is particularly dangerous and fuels antisemitic prejudices according to which Jews are treated as privileged victims. An article published in *Le Monde* on 3 May 2025 and signed by Basile Ader, Christophe Bigot, Richard Malka and Ilana Soskin, all lawyers at the Paris Bar, condemns this: *“To put it plainly, the idea is that any remarks suspected of being anti-Semitic or racist will no longer be dealt with by specialized judges or be subject to specific measures protecting freedom of expression. This concerns each and every*

*one of us, because we are all liable to be prosecuted for comments made in the course of free debate... It would be dishonest not to take note of the upsurge in such comments and acts, which reflect a hideous trivialization of antisemitism in a section of the population. But this proposal is all the more regrettable because it will lead to sterile dissension and be a source of discord... It will unite the defenders of freedom of expression against it, because it inaugurates the unravelling of a fundamental law of the Republic, and will profoundly weaken one of the most precious human rights, as stated in our own Constitution.”*

### **Antisemitism: A Historical and Current Phenomenon**

The term “*Antisemitismus*” was coined in 1879 by the German journalist Wilhelm Marr. He introduced this new term to lend a pseudo-scientific character to this hatred. Above all, this is a political racism that breaks with religious anti-Judaism, with an anti-system discourse that can rally both the right and the left, depending on whether the pseudo power of the Jews is associated with capitalism, communism or secularism.

The political permeability of antisemitism is all the greater because criticism of the system, science, politics and the media can accommodate a simple explanation that attributes all the ills that afflict us to the Jews.

### **Conspiracy Theories and Holocaust Denial**

Conspiracy theories are an archetypal form of antisemitism. One example is the immense success of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,<sup>1</sup> a fabrication created by the Tsar’s secret police and published in Russia in 1903, which claims that Jews and Freemasons have a plan to conquer the world. This work was one of the key documents used by Adolf Hitler

<sup>1</sup> The British author David Icke, refuting accusations of antisemitism, claims that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which inspired some of his works, are evidence not of a Jewish conspiracy but of a “reptilian conspiracy.” In 1991, conspiracy theorist Milton William Cooper republished *The Protocols* in his book *Behold a Pale Horse*, in which he accused the illuminati, a sort of code name to designate the Jews without naming them, of wanting to establish a new world order. In 2011, the New Age Christian conspiracist and antisemite Texe Marrs published an edition of *The Protocols* with additional notes by the American Hitlerite, Henry Ford.

as an argument against the Jews. The *Protocols* have been translated into many languages and, although we now know them to be a forgery, they are still used as antisemitic, anti-Zionist, anti-imperialist and anti-globalization arguments.

In France, the Gayssot Act, promulgated on 13 July 1990, prohibits denying the existence of crimes against humanity and therefore also applies to other cases. The term “*negationnisme*,” which is used to designate the denial of genocides or crimes against humanity, was coined in 1987 by Henri Rousso in response to the denial of the existence of the gas chambers and the Nazi will to totally exterminate the Jews and Gypsies in the Nazi camps. In the case of the Nazis, extermination was the ultimate goal, while the dispossession, exploitation and use of the internees’ labour was merely a means to profit from them. When Holocaust deniers, or negationists, add that the Jews “invented their genocide” in order to take over a country, we are at the limit of freedom of expression in anti-Zionism.

### **The Jewish Question in Christian and Muslim Areas: Older Strata**

Contrary to the common idea of a pure opposition between Judaism and Christianity, or of Christianity as the successor to Judaism, recent research shows that, at least in the early centuries and even beyond, Judaism and Christianity were in dialogue, and that there were conversions in both directions.

### **The context and the overall discourse allow us to distinguish a political opinion from the expression of racism**

Historians date the first severe measures of Christian intolerance towards Jews to the Council of Nicaea in the year 325: the ban on converting to Judaism and the ban on exercising certain professions, followed by the practice of forced baptisms. From the beginning of the 7th century, Jews, even converts, were considered in Catholic Europe as be-

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longing to a “separate race,” although there was no racial hatred in the modern, biological sense of the term. In Spain, the Arab conquest in 711 ushered in a period of relative prosperity for the Jews from 1002 to 1086, particularly in trading activities in cities, until they were expelled during the “*Reconquista*.”

The Church organized persecutions against Judaism and Jewish communities. A policy of subjugation based on the charge of deciding who would inherit rights in the young Germanic states succeeding the Empire. The notion of Judeo-Christianity thus appeared to be a denial of history: although Jews and Christians did not radically distinguish one faith from the other, the Christian religious authorities, supported by the political powers, implemented a policy designed to distinguish Jews from Christians and separate them from one another.

From the 13th century onwards, Jewish-only districts – ghettos – appeared in Germany, Spain, France and Portugal, and then spread throughout Europe. This Christian segregation was accompanied by an intensification of forced conversions. The ways of existing as a Jew and defining oneself as such diversified, leading to a certain Jewish “invisibility” and to new antisemitic ideas: if Jews were invisible, then they acted in a sneaky and hidden way in society and constituted an even greater danger. From then on, there was a new antisemitism that emerged from integration and/or assimilation: the Christian elites sought to protect themselves from imagined competition, but above all, the idea gradually took hold that assimilated Jews could corrupt Christianity from within. At a time when a new social class, the bourgeoisie, was emerging and the old authorities were being supplanted by the development of capitalism, the Church singled out the Jews as the henchmen of capitalism and those responsible for the revolutions that caused it to lose some of its power.

## A Judeo-Muslim Culture in the Near East and the Maghreb

When they conquered the Near East in the 7th century, the Muslims encountered Jewish populations there whose rites were very similar to their own and whose monotheism was well established.

Demographically and culturally, the Jewish world was located primarily in the Arab world from the 7th to the 16th centuries, after which its demographic and cultural weight shifted towards the European and Ashkenazi world. The existence of a certain cultural proximity through art, languages and even cultural practices is undeniable, even if the status of Jews in the Arab-Berber-Muslim world is the subject of debate: some highlight discriminatory measures, while others, on the contrary, observe the relative integration of Jews, including with the authorities, where some obtained prestigious positions.

Anti-Judaism was rife, however. Accusations of ritual crimes were documented in Beirut (1824), Antioch (1826) and Hama (1829). The “ritual crime” slander spread by Orthodox Christians in the Muslim Ottoman Empire led to the pogroms in Smyrna in 1872 and in Constantinople in 1874. We can speak of a certain contamination by Christian anti-Judaism followed by European antisemitism.

While colonial domination, Arab nationalism, then so-called “Islamist” ideologies, and finally, the creation of the State of Israel played a central role in the importation of European antisemitism, does this antisemitism have deep roots in historical experience?

Julien Cohen Lacassagne (historian and author of *Berbères juifs: L'émergence du monothéisme en Afrique du Nord* [Jewish Berbers: The Emergence of Monotheism in North Africa], published by Éditions La fabrique in June 2020) firmly disputes this: “Historically, the Jews in no way constitute a ‘people’ distinct from the societies in which they live. There was no “symbiosis,” or even tolerance, as we hear about with regard to Al-Andalus. There was, more precisely, an Arab-Berber society with a (politically dominant) Muslim component and a Jewish component: a Judeo-Muslim civilization.”

## Solidarity with the Palestinian people is compatible with the uncompromising fight against antisemitism and all forms of racism

In any case, these issues are still being debated. Despite the participation of Jews in national liberation movements, Arab national and anti-colonial revolutions have tended to exclude them. To stem the global spread of antisemitism, we have a collective responsibility to teach history and show how solidarity with the Palestinian people is compatible with the uncompromising fight against antisemitism and all forms of racism.