

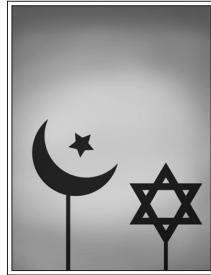
ANALYSIS

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IS ISLAMOPHOBIA THE NEW ANTISEMITISM?

IVAN KALMAR





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ABSTRACT

Comparisons to antisemitism have been appearing regularly in discussions of Islamophobia. The comparison between Islamophobia and antisemitism is strengthened by the very deep-seated similarities between these two forms of hatred throughout history, going back much farther than is generally realized. Recognizing these similarities strengthens the fight against Islamophobia. Those who propose that “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” do not mean either that antisemitism has now disappeared or that the two hatreds are identical. Furthermore, the proposition that Islamophobia is the new antisemitism neither affirms or denies that anti-Zionism can function as a new form of antisemitism also.

“Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is a warning. It suggests that Islamophobia today displays some of the warning signs that should have been recognized in the “old” antisemitism of the nineteen thirties, and that if we don’t recognize them then we imperil the freedom and safety not only of specific target populations, but of everyone.



This analysis examines the relationship between two forms of hatred, Islamophobia and antisemitism.

INTRODUCTION

“There’s a refugee crisis in Europe and people around the world are wondering how it came to pass that a totalitarian regime gained power in a democratic system. Sound familiar?” The question is from the promotional material for a film about Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), the noted German-Jewish philosopher.¹ But what exactly is meant to “sound familiar?” The writer counts on us to understand immediately that the crisis was that of Jewish refugees in Europe before World War II, and that we would connect that crisis to the rise to power of Adolf Hitler. She counts on us, too, to make a parallel to our own day.

As the film was being promoted in 2016, amidst the ongoing migration of hundreds of thousands of people to Europe, the notion of a refugee crisis was eminently contemporary and real. But what about the “totalitarian regime” that “gained power in a democratic system?” No totalitarian regime in the Western world (the area the writer clearly had in mind) has arisen as the result of the so-called migration crisis. The point is that this *might* happen now that there is a so-called Muslim refugee crisis, as it did when

1. Promotional material on Bloor Hot Docs Cinema (Toronto) site for the documentary *Vita Activa - The Spirit of Hannah Arendt* (2015). <http://boxoffice.hotdocs.ca/WebSales/pages/info.aspx?evtinfo=53510-fff311b7-cdad-4e14-9ae4-a9905e1b9cb0&accessed June 11, 2016>.

there was a Jewish one. The comparison with the Nazis, unlike the comparison with the so-called refugee crisis, is not an observation of a fact but a warning about the future.

“Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” has become a common phrase with which to express that warning. But how far can one push the parallel between these two forms of hatred? Quite far, I believe, even if its limits also have to be recognized, as a statement of fact, and even as a useful warning about a future we want to avoid.

Some scholars, most prominent among them Edward Said, had long recognized the connection between the language of hatred directed at Muslims and Jews,² but it is only very recently that the phrase, “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” and others like “Muslims are the new Jews” became part of ordinary discussion in the media, in the blogosphere, and around the dinner tables of the Western world. To cite one randomly chosen example, a young blogger called Charles B. Anthony writes under a picture of the future U.S. President, Donald Trump, who appears to be giving a Nazi salute:

I make no bones in saying this: Muslims are the new Jews. Perpetually vilified in the press, scapegoated by politicians and attacked in ever increasing numbers on the street, Muslims are punished for their faith and culture, shackled to the jailer of prejudice drunk on his own self-righteous thirst for supremacy.³

2. Anidjar, Gil. 2003. *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Anidjar, Gil. 2008. *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Bunzl, Matti. 2005. “Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some Thoughts on the New Europe,” *American Ethnologist* 32 (4), 499-508; Kalmar, Ivan. 2014. *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power*. London and New York: Routledge; Kalmar, Ivan and Derek J. Penslar, eds. 2005. *Orientalism and the Jews* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England); Kalmar, Ivan and Tariq Ramadan. 2016. “Antisemitism and Islamophobia.” In Yousef Meri, ed. *Routledge Handbook of Muslim-Jewish Relations*. New York and London: Routledge; Klug, Brian. 2014. “The Limits of Analogy: Comparing Islamophobia and Antisemitism,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 48 (5), 442-59; Gidley, Ben and James Renton, eds. 2016. *Antisemitism and Islamophobia: A Shared Story?* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

3. Middle East Eye, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/muslim-are-new-jews-fascism-goes-mainstream-667016617> accessed June 21, 2016.

Not everyone, however, is completely accepting of the comparison. Recognizing that there are both similarities and differences between the two hatreds, the Oxford philosopher, Brian Klug, argues that the question we need to ask is not “Are Islamophobia and antisemitism analogous?” but “What is the analogy worth?”⁴ Those who say (or deny) that “antisemitism is the new Islamophobia” understand that the worth of the analogy is strategic. What does it buy us? Those who agree with the statement have a strategy; those who don’t agree have a strategy, too. In each case, in fact, there may be more than one strategy at play.

There are concrete similarities between the hatreds of Jews and Muslims than just that they have both functioned at different times as the prejudiced Westerner’s enemy number one.

What we must ask is not only to what extent Islamophobia *is* the new antisemitism, but also what saying so buys those who agree, and what denying it buys those who don’t. And let me make it clear at the start that I am among the assenters. I think it is strategic for those of us interested in battling intolerant prejudice to declare, knowing full well that all analogies have their limits, that Islamophobia is the new antisemitism.

Let us examine the literal meaning of “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism.” If something is said to be the new something else, as in “green is the new black,” it means that something was replaced by something in such a way that the replacement nevertheless maintains some continuity with the original.

4. Klug, “The Limits of Analogy,” 458.

That green is the new black does not mean that black is no longer a color. It implies that there is some context or function in which green has not completely replaced black. The former U.S. President, Barack Obama, played on this implication when he said, “Orange is *not* the new black.”⁵ As an African-American, Obama was suggesting, as it turns out incorrectly, that Donald Trump, whose skin and hair are widely seen as orange, would not become the new president.

If we now take the much more serious example of Islamophobia being the new antisemitism then, contrary to what some critics of the phrase say, we are similarly not saying that antisemitism has disappeared. Those who criticize the phrase “antisemitism is the new Islamophobia” for suggesting that antisemitism no longer exists are, therefore, wrong.⁶ What we are saying is that in some sense Islamophobia serves the same role that antisemitism once did. Obviously, this role is going to be far more complex than just that Islamophobia is the latest fashion in the language of hate. We need to investigate deeper.

The simplest way of putting what I think *most* people mean by “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is that Muslims are now the main perceived enemy of prejudiced people in the West, as the main global enemy, the way that the Jews once were. “Now” is since the late nineteenth hundreds. By “once,” people generally mean the nineteen thirties –ignoring that the heyday of antisemitism was between about 1870 and 1945. It is the antisemitism of the thirties that I, following the common practice, would like to consider for comparison with today’s Islamophobia.

5. Obama on the *Jimmy Fallon Show*, June 9, 2016. <http://time.com/4363902/barack-obama-jimmy-fallon-trump-clinton-election-2016/> accessed December 13, 2016.

6. See, for example, Julie Nathan, “Islamophobia Isn’t the ‘New Antisemitism’ and the Statistics Prove It”, ABC, August 5, 2016.

To be sure, between Islamophobia today and the antisemitism of the thirties, there was another form of the Enemy Number One than either the Muslim or the Jew. Those who rallied to the defense of the West then identified the Enemy as communism. There are, in fact, important parallels between anticommunism and Islamophobia, but this is not my topic here. Suffice it to say that there are also important, and perhaps decisive, differences. To start with, communists were not an identifiable group in the sense of hate speech laws: not a race or ethnic/national group, but a group of people who chose to further an ideology that was objectively opposed to the West. To declare them as the enemy was, during the Cold War, stating the obvious rather than expressing a dark prejudice, even though some forms of right-wing anticommunism did acquire the trappings of racial and religious intolerance.

On the whole, there are many more concrete similarities between the hatreds of Jews and Muslims than just that they have both functioned at different times as the prejudiced Westerner's enemy number one. One of several such similarities that we don't find between Muslims and communists but do find between Muslims and Jews is that Muslims and Jews, but not communists, are followers of religions related to Christianity, and that their religious identity has been by and large connected for many centuries, which is not well known at all. Antisemitism and Islamophobia have a long common history and stem from a common language, a language called "orientalism."⁷ In academic jargon, one says that Muslims and Jews, but not communists, are groups that are "racialized." And the phrase, "Islamophobia is the new antisemitism," suggests that Muslims have replaced Jews as the number one racialized religious group that prejudiced people in the West now hate.

7. Kalmar and Ramadan, "Antisemitism and Islamophobia."

THE SHARED HISTORY OF ANTI-JEWISH AND ANTI-MUSLIM SENTIMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN WEST

Judaism and Islam define the limits of Christianity within a broader "Abrahamic" religious tradition based on the notion of One God and on a shared set of overlapping sacred narratives. The terms "Jew," "Muslim," and "Christian" themselves are of flexible and developing content, but what does not change is that in all periods they depend on one another very closely. This three-way dependence puts Judaism and Islam in a relation to Christianity, and to each other, that is qualitatively different from any other. It reveals a joint history of antisemitism and Islamophobia in spite of the almost infinite configurations and reconfigurations of their relationship to each other and to Christianity and the West.

From the beginning of Islam, Muslims as well as Jews were derided by many Christians, indeed for centuries by the Christian leadership as well as by lay people, as the enemy of the Christian religion. Typical Christians saw Jews as a people who knew God but not the right way, who had a false religion and who, moreover, stubbornly refused to recognize that Jesus was the Savior and the Son of God. As soon as Islam appeared in history, Muslims were regarded in the same way as followers of a false religion, of a false God, and moreover as heretics who, like the Jews, refused Christ. Of course, few knew that Jesus was considered a prophet by Muslims, but even if they did know, it would not help since Muslims refused to accept Jesus's divinity.

Muslims were seen, in a large number of medieval and later texts, as people who knew true (that is, Western) Christianity but rejected it for the outdated and superseded "Law of Moses," in

stubborn refusal of the true message of Christ.⁸ Thus, although Islam came after Christianity, it could be seen as not a genuine innovation, but a throwback to pre-Christian monotheism, that is, to Judaism. Much of the disputes, criticism, and venom directed at Judaism could therefore also be thrown at Islam. The Jew, in short, provided a pattern for imagining the Muslim.

In common Christian terminology, and especially its popularized versions, the “Old Testament God” worshipped by the Jews is referred to as “Jehovah” and the God of the Muslims as “Allah” (though “Jehovah” is a non-Jewish term and “Allah” simply means “God”). The characteristics of the two characters in the Christian imagination are quite similar. Harold Bloom, writing on the notion of this despotic God of absolute Law, concludes that “...Yahweh has not survived in Christianity, but only in the Allah of Islam. (...)”⁹ The imagined Allah of Islam has very much to do with the imagined God of the Old Testament, who does, according to classic Christian thought, survive also in Judaism.

To be sure, traditional Christian theology does make one very important difference between Jehovah and Allah. Allah does not have the potential to turn into a “higher” god. He is, so to speak, a stunted Jehovah: one who will never become a God the Father. Therefore, the Hebrew Scriptures can be read and interpreted to accord with the later New Testament message. The Qur’an must remain on the outside. Except for that important distinction, Christian orientalism’s Allah is for the most part more similar to Jehovah than he is different from him.

It is as important as it is paradoxical that Christian intolerance derives from the idea of Christian Love, as opposed to the hatred (and

intolerance) projected onto others. All Abrahamic faiths –Christianity as much as Judaism and Islam– demand devotion to a sublime power broaching no opposition and needing no counselors. But they couple obedience to that power with faith in its benevolence. Believers trust that God not only rules us but also loves and cares for us. Submission to a good God is the Abrahamic way to express confidence that the universe has a special place for every human being. This must be taken on faith, as there is no objective, impersonal evidence that it is so. Thus the conception of a sublime power ruling the universe brings with it the anxiety that this power is, in fact, unloving and uncaring, and that its only goal is its own pleasure. Such a power is exactly what Freud identified as the “primal father.” Freud’s construction may have no scientific validity, but as a *trope* the primal father describes exactly the Western image of the Oriental despot: Allah in heaven, or the various sultans, emirs, and ayatollahs on earth. These despotic personalities of imagined Muslim society function as a projection, from Christianity onto Islam and Judaism, of an existential anxiety about sublime power, in heaven as on earth.

In *fact*, as anyone even slightly familiar with Islam knows, among the many names of God *ar-ramān*, the merciful, is uppermost. To describe him as a heartless purveyor of cruel punishment is simply false. The same goes, in fact, for the Jewish conception of God. According to mainstream Jewish traditions, God governs the world according to the *shelosh-‘srehmiddot* or thirteen attributes, and all of these are interpreted as qualities or principles of compassion and forgiving. The legalistic Jehovah/Allah is simply an invention to reassure the Western Christian that his Lord loves him back. It projects his unacknowledged fear that it might be otherwise, onto his fellow-monotheists.¹⁰

8. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law*, Susan Conklin Akbari, “Placing the Jews in Late Medieval English Literature,” in Ivan D. Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews*, 32-50.

9. Harold Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 13.

10. For a discussion of Allah and Jehovah, see ch. 1 of Kalmar, *Early Orientalism*.

In the modern period, the semi-equation between Muslims and Jews was racialized by philosophers like Hegel, who taught that there was a so-called “Arab” religion, out of which sprang both Judaism and Islam.¹¹ While Christianity overcame the limitations of Arab religion, especially when Christianity was adopted by so-called Germanic people, Hegel believed that Muslims rather than overcoming “Arab religion” constituted its swan song, its last brilliant but brief rallying point. He was referring to the blossoming of Muslim philosophy, poetry, and art in the Middle Ages, which he saw as declining and disappearing in his own time.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the long history of seeing similarities between Jews and Muslims was given the modern racial form called “Semite.” Semites were peoples who spoke or traditionally had spoken Semitic languages, especially Hebrew and Arabic. Jews were therefore declared to be racial relatives of Arabs, but also at the same time Arabs became the prime example of Muslims, replacing the “Turks.”¹² The reason antisemites are called “anti-Semites” is that in the late nineteenth century the enemies of the Jews emphasized the kinship between Jews and Muslim Arabs. They did it to stress that Jews, because they were related to Arabs or Muslims, were foreigners in Europe. They did not share European values.

Among these European values are those labeled “religious freedom,” which relate to the struggle of European states and their elites to emancipate themselves from the political rule of the Christian church hierarchy. This struggle was expressed in terms of distinguishing the secular from the religious spheres of life.¹³ Public life,

including government, schools, and the like, was supposed to be free of the influence of religious communities, though in America not of religion itself. Religious life was relegated primarily to the private sphere. In public, everyone was an individual, and religious identities were to play no role.

The Muslim is no longer the external enemy of the hateful, the Muslim is as much an internal enemy as the Jew was; the Muslim has become the number one internal enemy, as well as the number one external enemy.

From the beginning, the Jews were a test case for this secular ideology. During the meeting of the revolutionary French National Assembly that decided to give Jews civil rights, the Count of Clermont-Tonnerre passionately exclaimed, “All to the Jews as individuals, nothing to the Jews as a nation.” He conditioned civil rights to the Jews on Jews giving up their communal rights. This divided the Jewish community, with the more “secular” people happy to oblige, but the more “religious” ones, such as many of the Jews of Alsace, preferring their old communal rights to individual rights. This labeled traditional Jews as “a nation within a nation,” to use Clermont-Tonnerre’s words.¹⁴ The parallels to today, when Muslims are labeled as enemies of secularism, are clear. Objectively, secularism has always meant institutionalizing some of the values of the religious majority, while relegating those of the minority to the private sphere which alone is labeled as “religion.”

11. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), vol. 2, 129.

12. Ivan Kalmar and Derek Penslar, Introduction, *Orientalism and the Jews*.

13. For a critical discussion of this development, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), especially Chapter 6.

14. Clermont-Tonnerre made these remarks in his speech to the National Assembly on December 23, 1789. Lynn Hunt, ed. *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), 8.

In spite of Islamophobic and antisemitic rhetoric eventually more or less emancipating itself from explicit reference to religious dogma, in anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim rhetoric today the metaphysical impulse for contrasting loveless Law with a forgiving religion of Love remains active. In the popular imagination, the prime examples of this unloving insistence remain in the classic punishments of “stoning” and “cutting off the hands.” A random perusal of an Internet search engine is certain to turn up over a hundred thousand entries associating “Old Testament” OR “Islam” with “stoning” and “cutting off hands.” To pick a random example, in the BBC program “Heart and Soul” the interviewer Celeste Hicks discussed “atrocities” committed by mainly Tuareg rebels in Timbuktu, the ancient city in Mali. To get her Malian interviewee to give examples of the transgressions committed, she offers, “Stoning and cutting off hands?” “Yes,” the man responds, “stoning and cutting off hands” (though there is no further mention in the broadcast of concrete cases in which such punishment was meted out).¹⁵ Characteristically, the fanatical administrators of “stoning” and “cutting off hands” are described as “Islamists” who are in conflict with a more local, i.e. non-Arab, form of Islam. The “bad Islam” of the terrorists is connected to the “sharia law” akin to the Old Testament, while the “good Islam” of the local allies of the West stresses, purportedly, the values of tolerance shared with the West.

The “stoning,” whether imagined or real, is usually of an adulteress (or an adulterer), bringing sex into the picture along with the violence. Stoning offenders is indeed legislated both in the Israelite and the Islamic traditions.¹⁶ Cutting off the hands of a thief is not a punishment in the Hebrew Bible, but it is always presented as the

result, in “sharia law,”¹⁷ of the “Old Testament” Law of Talion, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” The Talion is found, though in a slightly different form, in the Qur’an as well as the Hebrew Bible.¹⁸ Rabbinical sources¹⁹ as well as the Qur’an itself in fact recommend, like Jesus, foregoing the just punishment in the name of mercy. Yet Jesus’s famous call to turn the other cheek – “You have heard it said, an eye for an eye ... but I say to you, if someone smites your cheek turn him the other cheek also”²⁰ – is probably the most common example of a kind of Christian love (“love your enemies,” Jesus adds) that contrasts with the alleged unfeeling application of law-as-vengeance by both Muslims and Jews.

True, in recent times in the West, Jews have been far less frequently accused of legalistic cruelty than Muslims. Yet, in twenty-first century Europe there have been new waves of proposed or actual legislation against infant or child circumcision or against the ritual slaughter of food animals. These bring to the surface the deep structure of an ancient imagined opposition between a cruel Law and a regime of Mercy: now transformed into a clash between a civilization of authoritarian oppression versus one of human rights and freedom.

To be fair, not everyone hated Jews and/or Muslims. But to many of those who did, they were two faces of the same enemy. There was, to be sure, one major difference. In Gil Anidjar’s terms, the Jew was the internal enemy, and the Arab the external.²¹ (As noted earlier, “Arab” was to most ordinary people in the West the same thing as “Muslim.”) For many Jews resided among Western Christians, but most Muslims lived outside of the West.

15. “Beyond the War: Faith and Culture in West Africa.” *Heart and Soul*, BBC podcast released April 6, 2013.

16. For example, Leviticus 20:10-12 and various *hadith*, including Muslim, 10:1025.

17. “Sharia law” is a familiar-sounding unitary phrase often used by people who are completely ignorant of the complexities of the various Islamic legal traditions.

18. Exodus 21:24, Qur’an 5:45.

19. For example, Talmud BavaQamma 83b.

20. Matthew 5:39.

21. Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab*, 38.

What makes the proposition that Islamophobia is the new antisemitism so powerful, is that now the Muslim is no longer the external enemy of the hateful, the Muslim is as much an internal enemy as the Jew was; the Muslim has become the number one internal enemy, as well as the number one external enemy. The Muslim is the new insider who cannot be trusted because of his and her connection to outsiders, the new international conspiracy that threatens “us” from outside and from within. The new Muslim is like the old Jew.

Today’s Islamophobia is the byproduct of migration of millions of Muslims from the former colonies and semi-colonies into the Western world. It began somewhere in the seventies and was soon noticeable enough for “Islamophobia” to become a known expression.²²

Terrorism came as a supposed cause of Islamophobia only later. “Nine Eleven” was not the first terrorist attack committed in the name of Islam, but the 2001 suicide attack that destroyed the World Trade Center towers was the most spectacular and, crucially, it occurred in America, which had felt itself safe from such attacks. The ability of the terrorists to strike in New York, and at the architectural symbol of the financial and commercial power of the West, increased the conviction that they were now here among us. Targeting America, separated by an ocean from the troubled Old World, had a much greater effect on Western insecurity than previous terror attacks even if they had occurred in a Western country like France. The terrorists were seen by the prejudiced as acting out of an impetus inherent in Islam. But the fundamental impetus of their frustration was the legacy of colonial domination and the beginning of the era of mass migration from the postcolonial world.

22. It was used, for example, in 1985 by Edward Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” *Cultural Critique* 1:89-107.

Migration as the impetus for hatred might appear to distinguish Islamophobia from the heyday of antisemitism, which was from the late nineteenth century to the Nazi era. But modern antisemitism did also arise largely in response to migration. Hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Russian Empire and adjacent parts of Austria-Hungary migrated to urban centers, their destination ranging from Budapest and Vienna to Paris and London and to New York and Buenos Aires. One of the major preachers of political antisemitism, the French writer Edouard Drumont, described an invasion of France by Jews originating ultimately in Vilnius, now the capital of Lithuania, which Drumont described as *vagina judaeorum*.²³ Even Jews like the author Fritz Mauthner, writing not much before the rise of the Nazis, recommended that Jewish migrants from the East be banned from entering Germany.²⁴ Later, when German Jews themselves became refugees, the headline of a German-influenced publication in Czechoslovakia proclaimed, “The Jewish immigrant community should understand that we don’t want it here.”²⁵

Beyond migration, there are other important contexts where Islamophobia resembles antisemitism. The series of “unfortunate events,” from the “liberal” point of view, that included the British public voting to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as president, as well as the rising popularity of authoritarian figures like the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, in the West,²⁶ have all been attributed to a widespread suspicion of politicians

23. Édouard Drumont. *La France juive; Essai d'histoire contemporaine*. 13 ed. Vol. 1. (Paris: C. Marpon & E. Flammarion, 1886), 10.

24. Fritz Mauthner in Arthur A. Landsberger, ed., *Judentaufen* (Munich: Müller, 1912), 75-77.

25. *Večér*, October 14, 1938. <http://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/dokumenty/antisemitismus/antisemitismus-za-druhe-ceskoslovenske-republiky/press-3/zidovska-emigrace-nechape-ze-ji-zde-nechceme/> accessed December 13, 2016.

26. “Extremists Turn to a Leader to Protect Western Values: Vladimir Putin.” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2016.

and established authority. This has evidently contributed to Islamophobia as a scapegoat. And hatred of democratically elected politicians was at least as strong in prewar Germany, Italy, or France, stimulating a rise in antisemitism.

Antisemitism, furthermore, may also, like Islamophobia, be understood in the historical context of colonialism, although here the parallels are less evident. While one does not want to stretch the comparison too far, the areas from which the so-called “Eastern” Jews came from were somewhat like colonies of the two great powers, Russia and Austria-Hungary, and the Jews themselves resembled colonial populations to some extent, as they lacked sovereign expression of their ethnic, religious, and national identity.

Finally, terrorism, too, played a role in antisemitism. Politically motivated anarchist terror was quite common before and after World War I, some of it perpetrated by Jewish individuals and blamed by antisemites on the Jews as a whole.²⁷

Last but not least, Islamophobia resembles antisemitism in its fondness for conspiracy theories, uncovering plots by the Enemy to rule the entire world. Bruce Bawer’s book, *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within*,²⁸ which had controversially been nominated for the National Book Critics Award, “tells it all.” While the title only refers to “radical” Islam, the content often drops the awkward qualification. It compares not Islamophobes, but “radical Islam” to the Nazis. Muslims are foreigners who had infiltrated and “colonized” the West, are gnawing at its foundations until it collapses. While most Europeans sleep, however, some are awake in addition to

the unmaskers such as Bower. These beguiled bleeding hearts invite Muslims in and stifle any criticism of their plots. They are “the international left,” transnational traitors closely comparable to the liberal press as vilified in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the notorious forged document and the bible of modern antisemitic extremism.²⁹ (Walter Rathenau, the “self-hating Jew” we just mentioned was, paradoxically, considered as one of the Jewish Elders.)

The accusation that Jews or Muslims wish to dominate the world is ironic, given that historically it was *Christianity* that first used the worship of the One God as the justification for building a worldwide empire. Islam’s quest to extend its political rule arose at first in opposition to Byzantium. Subsequent struggles between Christian and Muslim realms appeared at first to favor the Muslims, but since at least the late eighteenth century the Christian West has been ascendant. The Muslim experience has been one of resisting Western imperialism much more than fostering an eastern one. This is why it is so ironic that many in the Christian West, whose domination has reached an extent never dreamed of by Alexander the Great, accuse other religious communities of working to rule the world.

Add these facts to the centuries of imagining Muslims and Jews as the common enemy of the Christian West, and you can understand why Edward Said says that the figure of the “Jew” in antisemitism and that of “Arab,” read “Muslim” was “essentially the same,” with the “animus” of antisemitism therefore easily transferred to what he at the time saw as discourse about Arabs, and now we recognize as discourse about Muslims in general.³⁰

27. See, for example, Paul Knepper. 2008. “The other invisible hand: Jews and anarchists in London before the First World War.” *Jewish History* 22(3):295-312.

28. Bruce Bawer, *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within*. 2006. New York: Doubleday.

29. Michael Hagemester, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Between History and Fiction,” *New German Critique* 103 (2008), 83-95.

30. Said, *Orientalism*, 286.

DIFFERENCES

None of this is meant to deny the important and deep-reaching differences between antisemitism then and Islamophobia now. Jews were objectively, although not as much as in the view of the antisemites, by the end of the nineteenth century an important part of the cultural and business elites of many Western countries. Many Jewish individuals played a leading part in politics as well as in science and the media. Muslims have not so far reached anything of that kind of “success,” even if some are getting there. Another major difference is that while antisemites were literally convinced that they could smell a Jew from a mile, and regarded the Jew as much a racial alien as they now regard Syrian refugees, yet identifying Jews was in reality even harder than identifying Muslims. This is why one of the Nazi’s first acts was to force Jews to wear the identifying Yellow Star. In contrast, though this may not be so with many Bosnian or Turkish Muslims, not to speak of converts, most Muslim migrants today can be distinguished as non-white, with a greater degree of accuracy than was ever the case with Jews. This adds impetus to conspiracy theories about the Jews being an invisible, hidden force on one hand, but also makes discrimination easier against Muslims on the other.

The existence of millions of people in Muslim-majority countries, some of them oil rich, adds a modern geopolitical dimension that did not exist in antisemitism, when there was no Jewish-majority country at all.

In spite of such important differences, however, there are enough similarities between antisemitism in its heyday and Islamophobia today to say that the aphorism, “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is a useful phrase. For as we have seen, the most common function of the phrase, “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is not to state a literal equation, but to serve as a warning.

The warning is not that, as was the case with antisemitism, Islamophobia, too, would lead to a genocidal crime on the magnitude of the Holocaust. No one is suggesting that there will be a Holocaust of Muslims. The warning is: stop Islamophobia now, before it becomes even worse. Worse doesn’t need to mean the planned death of six million people. But it could mean, in addition to severe suffering, including death, to millions of Muslims, also the death of freedom and democracy in the West. This is why Muslims and non-Muslims are called upon to fight Islamophobia not only as an act of solidarity, but as an act of self-defense.

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THE ISRAEL CONNECTION

But if the phrase, “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is a warning against the potential for greater evil, then why object to its use? The real reason is not about cold facts susceptible to academic study. The real reason has to do with the strategic uses of the phrase.

For, as is well known, there is a competing “new antisemitism” about. And that is Anti-Zionism. The competing assertion is that “Anti-Zionism is the new antisemitism.” Some pro-Israel people, whom it is important not to confuse with all Jews or with all Israelis or their friends, insist that antisemitism is greatly on the rise in the West. The U.S. State Department’s annual report on international

religious freedom made the assessment in 2015 that “anti-Israel sentiments” that year “crossed the line into anti-Semitism.” In their evidence, they included anti-Jewish and anti-Israel attacks carried out by pro-Palestinian militants.³¹ These are often Muslim residents of Western countries, including immigrants. A fairly good summary of the typical anti-Zionist position is the one made by the United States Committee on International Religious Freedom, which is an independent federal government commission. It found, in an April 2015 report (after noting that antisemitic attacks are often carried out by Muslims who misunderstand Islam), that

Europe’s leading heads of state acknowledge that Jew-hatred is spreading. Jews are seeing their religious freedom violated, their gravesites vandalized, their synagogues desecrated, and Jewish lives lost. (...) Some say that hatred of the state of Israel, not the Jews of Europe, is behind this upsurge. Yet the cry of many haters is “death to all Jews.” Make no mistake. Acts of terror perpetrated against Jewish schoolchildren in Europe have no conceivable connection to Israel’s policies in the Middle East. Anti-Zionism often is a cloak for anti-Semitism which comes through when people deploy words designed to delegitimize Israel, demonize its people and hold it to standards far above other countries.³²

It should be obvious, however, that while Israel’s policies do not justify killing Jewish schoolchildren, in the minds of the terrorists there definitely was, however perverse it may be, a connection. Nevertheless, assuredly there are many antisemitic people among “anti-Zionists” - a term that is almost as hopelessly broad and imprecise as “Zionist” itself, which to some antisemites simply means

“Jew.” But the Commission on International Religious Freedom itself recognizes that “Today’s anti-Semitism differs from that of the 1930s.” As with any such comparison – including the one between Islamophobia and antisemitism, there are similarities and differences, and affirming one rather than the other can be (but need not be) simply a choice of political strategy. Painting anti-Zionists with the same brush as classic Western antisemites is at best an oversimplification. Ultimately it is an unfair use of “antisemitism,” as a passive-aggressive label to deflect criticisms of Israel.

In fact, it may well be right that antisemitism of the classic, not-anti-Zionism variety, is in fact on the rise, but if so it may not be for the reasons that those who complain about a rise in antisemitism usually mention. Some far right parties may have toned down their antisemitism and refocused on Islamophobia, but the tradition of antisemitic rhetoric remains, and informs their rhetoric. And sometimes, it’s the other way around. Islamophobia revitalizes antisemitism. In the Czech Republic, a country that surveys show as low on antisemitism but high on Islamophobia, Zbynek Tarant has discovered that anti-Jewish literature is being handed out at anti-Islam rallies.³³ In America, although Donald Trump presents himself as a friend of the Jews, Jewish public personalities have complained of receiving hate messages from Trump supporters. Bethany Mandel of the Jewish newspaper *Forward* writes, “My anti-Trump tweets have been met with such terrifying and profound anti-Semitism that I bought a gun ...”³⁴

31. “Washington: European Anti-Israel Sentiment Crossed Into Anti-Semitism.” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 15, 2015.

32. United States Commission on International Freedom. “U.S. News and World Report – An Unsafe Place for Jews.” April 2, 2015. <http://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/op-eds/us-news-and-world-report-unsafe-place-jews> accessed December 14, 2016.

33. Tarant, Zbyněk. 2016. “Connections between antisemitism and Islamophobia – What do the antisemites themselves think about it?” Paper presented at the Workshop on Islamophobia in the East of the European Union, Prague, October 23-24, 2016.

34. Bethany Mandel, “May Trump Tweets Earned Me So Many Anti-Semitic Haters That I Bought a Gun.” *Forward*, June 2, 2016. <http://forward.com/opinion/336159/my-trump-tweets-earned-me-so-many-anti-semitic-haters-that-i-bought-a-gun/> accessed December 14, 2016. See also “I Hadn’t Been Called a Kike Since Fourth Grade. Donald Trump Changed All That.” *Haaretz*, October 6, 2016. <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/1.745918> accessed December 14, 2016.

But in seeing a threat of revived antisemitism, those who say that “Anti-Zionism is the new antisemitism” are not referring to the far right. What worries them are people on the left. And they forget their own self-interest as Jews when they insist on seeing all criticism of Israel as antisemitic, and yet they explain away the growing signs of an antisemitic revival among right-wing Islamophobes. For, although even if it were true that anti-Zionism was a new form of antisemitism, the strategic warning, “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” could be true at the same time. That this is not usually seen so by anti-anti-Zionists speaks volumes.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, objective similarities abound, in spite of differences, between antisemitism in the past and Islamophobia today. But above all, “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is useful as a warning. If more people had recognized the need to fight antisemitism in the thirties, it would have stopped a savage attack on civilization. And if more of us fight Islamophobia, we will save freedom, democracy, and human decency today.

The policy-oriented conclusions that follow from this article are:

- “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is an effective slogan in the fight against Islamophobia (and antisemitism).
- The phrase does not suggest that Islamophobia is the same as antisemitism, but highlights:
 - Strong similarities between Islamophobia today and antisemitism in the past.
 - The deep history of similar representations of Jews and Muslims in the Western Christian world. (This history is not generally known but should be.)
- Rejecting “antisemitism is the new Islamophobia” because the two forms of hatred are only similar but not the same can be a masked denial of the need to fight either or both of them.
- “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is a warning that, like antisemitism, hatred of Islam and Muslims can destroy freedom and democracy for everyone.

Comparisons to antisemitism have been appearing regularly in discussions of Islamophobia. The comparison between Islamophobia and antisemitism is strengthened by the very deep-seated similarities between these two forms of hatred throughout history, going back much farther than is generally realized. Recognizing these similarities strengthens the fight against Islamophobia. Those who propose that “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” do not mean either that antisemitism has now disappeared or that the two hatreds are identical. Furthermore, the proposition that Islamophobia is the new antisemitism neither affirms or denies that anti-Zionism can function as a new form of antisemitism also. “Islamophobia is the new antisemitism” is a warning. It suggests that Islamophobia today displays some of the warning signs that should have been recognized in the “old” antisemitism of the nineteen thirties, and that if we don’t recognize them then we imperil the freedom and safety not only of specific target populations, but of everyone.



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