

## **ANTISEMITISM AND THE MEDIA IN ITALY**

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In Italy, open antisemitism is frowned on, and isolated through both social condemnation and legal means today. Nevertheless, its traditional imagery occasionally becomes conflated with rhetoric about the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian dispute, which is the main source of anti-Jewish sentiments in Italy. This phenomenon appears in the mainstream press of all political persuasions, as well as among extremists. It cuts across the ideological spectrum, uniting the anti-global left, the xenophobic and Fascist right, pre-Vatican II Catholics, along with more mainstream segments of society. It is not so much the criticism of Israel *per se*, in other words, that constitutes antisemitism, but the confluence of antisemitic imagery and stereotypes with criticism of Israel.

Across Europe – Italy is no exception – Israel’s advocates protest that behind criticism of Israel there sometimes lurks a more sinister agenda dangerously bordering on antisemitism.<sup>1</sup> Critics disagree. In their view, public attacks on Israel are not misplaced. Nor is the source of anti-Jewish sentiment: Israel’s behaviour is reprehensible and so are those Jews who defend it. Still, the intensity of this debate shows the difficulty in agreeing on a proper definition. The lack of a precise boundary is both cause and effect of the way public opinion defines, understands and identifies antisemitism and the current spate of anti-Jewish hostility.

Surveys show that traditional prejudice still exists, mainly on the fringes; but most animosity derives from the public perception of the Arab–Israeli conflict, itself a result of its coverage. Furthermore, polls show that such sentiments are not confined to fringe extremist groups.

### **Antisemitism, public opinion and the Arab–Israeli conflict**

Recent public opinion surveys in European countries have measured traditional antisemitic prejudice and have tried to determine whether, and if so, antisemitism makes its way into the coverage – and the public perception – of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Among them there were two surveys commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), that included data on Italy.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of an ‘antisemitism index’, using eleven key questions,<sup>3</sup> 15 per cent of Italians were considered to harbour antisemitic views in 2004, down from 23 per cent in 2002. More specifically, 57 per cent (58 per cent)<sup>4</sup> thought ‘that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Italy’; 24 per cent (30 per cent) thought that ‘Jews don’t care what happens to anyone but their own kind’; 10 per cent (27 per cent) thought that ‘Jews are more willing than others to use shady practices to get what they want’; and 29 per cent (42 per cent) thought that ‘Jews have too much power in the business world’. Ninety-two per cent of those interviewed expressed strong support for active government intervention to fight antisemitism, but 43 per cent (43 per cent) felt that ‘Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust’.

The surveys showed strong correlations between education, age and antisemitism: those over the age of 65 or who completed their education by age 17 or before are more likely than the rest of the population to agree with the anti-Semitic characterisations presented in the survey.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-five per cent of respondents aged 65 or older and 20 per cent among those who finished their studies by the age of 17 harboured traditional antisemitic views, compared with 15 per cent of respondents overall.<sup>6</sup> These findings suggest that (1) traditional prejudice is inversely correlated to education, and (2) the generation schooled under Fascism in the 1930s and 1940s internalised the antisemitic message of Fascist education in the period 1938–45.

Traditional antisemitism is therefore on the fringes; but hostility to Israel is on the rise. A Eurobarometer poll conducted in early November 2003<sup>7</sup> asked the following: ‘For each of the following countries, tell me if, in your opinion, it does or does not present a threat to peace in the world?’<sup>8</sup> With a European average of 59 per cent seeing Israel as a threat to world peace (more than Iran, North Korea, the United States, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan), Italy scored below

average (48 per cent).<sup>9</sup> These results stirred controversy in Italy,<sup>10</sup> soliciting more thorough surveys to corroborate the Eurobarometer.

One such survey appeared in the Italian daily *Il Corriere della Sera*.<sup>11</sup> Questions aimed at ascertaining the degree of traditional anti-Jewish prejudice of respondents (see Table 1) were then linked to attitudes and knowledge of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

**Table 1 Survey on antisemitism, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 10 November 2003**

<i>In your opinion:</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
Jews are not truly Italians	22%	74%	4%
Jews should leave Italy	8%	91%	1%
Jews have a different mentality and way of life from other Italians	51%	41%	8%
Judaism is intolerant	20%	66%	14%
Jews have a special relation with money	39%	41%	20%
Jews are not nice and do not inspire confidence	11%	82%	7%
Jews are biased in their support for Israel	37%	41%	22%
Jews should stop acting like victims because of the Holocaust and persecutions of fifty years ago	38%	56%	6%
Jews are lying when they claim that Nazism murdered 6 million of them in the gas chambers	11%	83%	5%

The data shown in the table suggest the following: first, those embracing Holocaust denial are a small (11 per cent) but significant minority. However, while only one in ten respondents question historical facts, 38 per cent think that Jews play the victim card. This response is not only worrisome because of its potential implications for collective memory as the Holocaust fades into the past, but also because it suggests an underlying resentment towards Jews and about Europe's collective guilt in the Shoah. If one links this to Israel – with its emphasis on the Shoah as part and parcel of its identity and collective Ethos – and the widespread perception that Israel was born thanks to the West's sense of guilt over the Holocaust, one can see how these data indicate a possible link between hostile feelings towards Jews and the Arab–Israeli conflict. This is especially true if one factors in the view, held by a similar 37 per cent, that Jews are biased in favour of Israel. This opinion, set against a generally less than friendly media environment on Israel and a tendency to conflate Israel and the Jews, suggests a bias against Jews and an assumption that their generally expected support for Israel is going to be partial and ordinarily harder to defend. It is their status as Jews, in other words, that explains their views, not the possible validity of their particular political stance.

Two more surveys were published in January 2004, one by Ansa-Eurispes<sup>12</sup> and a second by the *Corriere*.<sup>13</sup> Both confirm the above trends: according to Eurispes, there is a hard-core antisemitic constituency among the public, whose size varies depending on the question posed: 11.1 per cent think the Holocaust did not produce as many victims as suggested by history books; 34.1 per cent think that Jews exercise their power over the economy, finance and the media 'in a concealed fashion'.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, those who view Jews as too powerful and exercising their influence behind the scenes are not confined to the ideological periphery of the political spectrum: though more prominent on the right fringes, they nevertheless are a cross section of society, indicating the ubiquitous nature of prejudice and the fact that predisposition to embrace it is not confined to the extreme right, as is commonly assumed. Criticism of

Israel's policies is solid, with 74.5 per cent disagreeing with Ariel Sharon's approach to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, but it is extreme in the case of the 35.9 per cent of respondents who agree with the statement that 'the Israeli government is perpetrating a full-fledged genocide and is acting with the Palestinians the way the Nazis did with the Jews'. As in other cases across the continent, the conflation of Israel's military policies with Nazism suggests a demonising element in the way the conflict is presented to the public that has progressively blurred the boundaries between legitimate criticism and irrational, prejudiced opposition to Israel. It also clarifies why a significantly high number of respondents felt that Jews are biased in favour of Israel: Israel's policy is so discredited in the media, so the logic goes, that only Jews would support it, and this owing to the fact that they are not truly loyal citizens!

While a significant number of respondents condemn Palestinian terror and suicide bombings, still 36.9 per cent agree that blame for the attacks lays squarely on 'Sharon's aggressive and imperialist policies'. Israel's right to exist is considered sacrosanct by 91.8 per cent of the interviewees, but 28 per cent make it conditional on the establishment of a Palestinian state. A picture thus emerges where most of the hostility Israel draws seems to be caused by its policies, or more likely by the way the public perceive those policies through the filter of media reporting. That hostility is directed not only at Israel, but at Jews as well, drawing on well-established traditional prejudice that has little to do with Israel. The reason for this is that the way the conflict is portrayed plays a crucial role in fostering or hindering anti-Jewish prejudice. That this has a direct impact on anti-Jewish prejudice becomes evident if one looks at the findings of the ADL surveys on the nexus between antisemitism and the Israeli–Palestinian dispute: 62 per cent of European respondents in the 2002 surveys believed that recent violence is a product of anti-Israel sentiments and not traditional antisemitic or anti-Jewish feelings. In 2004, 55 per cent thought so. And as noted, while a majority of respondents claimed to know little or nothing about the history of the conflict, a third said they knew 'a great deal' or 'a good amount' about it. Contrary to what transpired in the Italian-run surveys, the ADL poll showed that the more informed that citizens were, the more likely they were to view Israel unfavourably. There is nothing better than these findings to show the importance of information in shaping public views. According to the ADL surveys, while anti-Jewish prejudice proves resilient, most people deny harbouring it, although they readily admit that prejudice exists but is not easily admitted to, owing to public condemnation. Faced with a new wave of antisemitic incidents, the public feel that they are not antisemitic, but anti-Israel inspired. Thus, while denying that criticism of Israel might in any way be antisemitic, many obviously acknowledge a link between Israel and Jew-hatred. This is a contradiction, caused by a public discourse that has become infected by prejudice but refuses to recognise it for what it is, hiding behind the argument that anti-Zionism, anti-Israeli-ism and anti-Sharonism are not the same as antisemitism.<sup>15</sup>

Media coverage undoubtedly plays a central role in shaping attitudes toward Israel. The Middle East gets significant media attention and is one of the most-followed stories. According to the 2002 ADL survey, 57 per cent of Europeans were closely following news coverage of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.<sup>16</sup> The more closely people follow the conflict, the more they sympathize with Palestinians. Overall, then, while surveys show the media's great impact on shaping attitudes on Israel, they also tell another story. Sympathy for Palestinians is directly correlated to media coverage and to knowledge of history. In both cases, hostility towards Israel is bound to grow over time. Scholarship over the conflict is almost uniformly hostile to Israel, and therefore history books tend to portray Israel as the aggressor. Media coverage – reflecting journalists' political preferences, their sensitivity to public opinion and their knowledge of the subject based on the same sources as are provided to students by the academic community – is not likely to swing in favour of Israel.

### **Dimensions of extremism in Italy**

Despite legislation barring the reconstitution of the Fascist party and making it a crime to openly advocate or defend Fascist ideology and its political and historical legacy, this nostalgia appears in countless publications and, recently, websites.

Though different in scope, focus, collection of materials and affiliation, radical right websites share some themes, among them antisemitism. Some provide links to classic Fascist and Nazi literature, such as Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and more recent neo-Fascist writings. They share an anti-modern agenda. Some emphasise the link between their ultra-nationalist ideology and Christianity,<sup>17</sup> while others refer to the pagan dimension of Nazi and Fascist ideologies.<sup>18</sup> All declare their enmity to what they call 'worldism',<sup>19</sup> whose latest manifestation is globalisation. Behind 'worldism' they see occult forces, driven by money and power, whose agenda is to rule the world. 'Worldism' and globalization are significantly viewed as shared enemies by Islamic and Catholic websites as well as far-left organisations.

Jews feature prominently in this scheme, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly. The fight against globalisation stems from a desire to preserve national identities and cultures, and in some cases 'racial purity'. Globalisation is viewed as an instrument through which to perpetuate American hegemony, and often 'worldism', globalisation and imperialism are used as near-synonymous. The bogeymen of right-wing anti-global rhetoric (and not only that rhetoric) are the IMF, the Trilateral Commission, global finance, the European Union (EU) and NATO. Jews are often seen behind these organisations, pulling strings. Equally, Israel is often depicted as the instrument through which globalisation and imperialism strive to subjugate the Middle East. Often an alternative economic and political model is offered, one that emphasises the role of a united Europe as both a bulwark of Christianity and a competitor, or adversary, of the United States. Absent is open racism against non-European peoples, who are often seen as a natural ally for Europe in the struggle against imperialism, 'worldism' and US domination: the 'oppressed people' of the 'Third World' suffer from the same socio-economic oppression and can have a similar agenda in fighting back the occult forces of globalising 'worldism'.<sup>20</sup> It is in this context that many websites support the Palestinian cause as part of an anti-imperialist struggle. The language used often betrays strong antisemitic inclinations.

Holocaust denial is a favoured theme. Articles and links 'expose' the 'Jewish Dogma' on the Holocaust – show its use for the advancement of Jewish power in the world and as a cover-up of 'historical truth'. Forza Nuova (FN)<sup>21</sup> belongs to the fringe of the right wing. It espouses a radically nationalist and reactionary worldview. It opposes immigration, which it defines as 'an invasion' and a threat to Italian-ness. As regards foreign policy, FN calls for Italy's exit from NATO and the removal of NATO bases from Italy. It decries the possibility that Turkey or Israel may join the European Union, because of their different religious and cultural backgrounds, while it supports membership for Russia, 'the stronghold of Christianity'. Its rhetoric, profoundly anti-American, emphasises the role of the nation, promoting steps to revitalise what it considers a decaying Italian nation against the onslaught of 'globalisation and worldism', the immigrant 'invasion', and the weakening of national identity under the weight of European integration. The Europe it supports is an opponent, not an ally, of the United States. The present EU structure is feared as an instrument of 'multinationals and strong powers' controlling Europe's destiny through its bureaucracy and currency. FN denounces 'usury and masonry', emphasising family values and tradition as the pillars of a healthy society. It depicts the present state of affairs as 'corrupt and decaying', owing to 'foreign' influences, presenting its political views as the way forward to 'regenerate' Italian society.

A different site, 'Brigata Nera' (Black Brigade),<sup>22</sup> promotes similar values in starker terms. Brigata Nera offers its viewers abundant material on Nazism, Fascism and their leaders. Articles express strong opposition to immigration and globalisation, denouncing the idea that Europe has Judaeo-Christian roots and doubting their existence. Western culture's expansive nature in

previous times is decried for its consequences, namely, opening Europe to non-Europeans, with its resulting 'contamination' and loss of identity. A selection of writings by the anti-modern, antisemitic and Fascist thinker Julius Evola is available. A section on revisionism summarises Holocaust denial's main themes, with an added Italian dimension, casting doubt on the credibility of Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish Holocaust survivor and witness to its horrors in his writings. A section devoted to 'Jews' offers insights on Zionism, 'facts' about Jews and alleged 'Jewish terrorism' in France against members of the French *Front Nationale*. In discussing Zionism, Brigata Nera asserts the authenticity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (long known to be a forgery, of course), proceeding to define Zionism as 'a political-religious nationalist movement that calls for the conquest of all nations of the world through the mastery and control of the state and capitalist finances of all the countries of the world'.<sup>23</sup>

The ideological proximity of extreme right, left and Catholic websites is recurrent. In the monthly *Aurora*, published by the *Movimento Antagonista*, one can find support for radical Islam in its fight against the 'Zionist Entity'. The openly Fascist themes of the publication do not prevent its support for Islamic fighters. In an article praising the 413 Hamas leaders expelled to Lebanon by Israel in December 1992, the author advocated support for Hamas:

Abandoned by all, isolated from the world, with the Koran as their only weapon, ready for martyrdom, these Islamic militants are defeating the Israeli government, thus exposing its true nature independently of its political affiliation. These men must be an example for all of us. In Europe it is our duty to offer total and unconditional support to the fighters of the Intifadah. 1993 must be an occasion to increase our militant solidarity with a campaign for Palestinian resistance. The struggle fought in Gaza and al-Quds is our own struggle.<sup>24</sup>

More explicit support for movements opposing Zionist and American imperialism, 'worldism' and political, cultural and economic penetration may be found on the website of the political grouping *Movimento Fascismo e Libertá* (MFL; [www.fascismoeliberta.net](http://www.fascismoeliberta.net)), an openly Fascist organization devoted to nostalgia for the Fascist puppet regime of the *Saló Republic* (1943-45). In a recent leading article on the war in Iraq,<sup>25</sup> MFL declares:

Frankly speaking, we do not understand why there should be any doubt on the position of the Movimento Fascismo e Libertá regarding the nth war of blood against gold. Is there even one true Fascist who could support the nth imperialistic aggression of the various Anglo-American and Zionist criminals? Is there any true Fascist who can miss the equivalence between the Second World War, which was wanted and conducted by the same enemy entities against a Fascist and .Fascistising. Europe? The motivations are the same: cut at birth any form of nationalist opposition that can be impervious to worldist and Zionist penetration.<sup>26</sup>

Another source of anti-Jewish hatred in Italy is found among traditionalist Catholic groups, whose rejection of the Church's overtures to Judaism following the Vatican II council is most prominently expressed by the website 'Holy War'. Its stated objective is combating 'Jewish terrorism', and 'Nazi Israel', including its main supporter and sponsor, the United States. According to the opening page of Holy War, 'The Jewish Mafia runs America': Colin Powell, Dick Cheney and George W. Bush are labelled as 'racist Jews'. There follows a list of 'Bush's racist Jewish advisers' and a call to start 'taking America back now'.<sup>27</sup>

Holy War offers a wealth of material, from links to fundamentalist publications to Gregorian chant. However, most rubrics have a Jewish focus and an obsession with the 'Jewish conspiracy'. For example, a collection of 'scandalous images' of Pope John Paul II decries his visit to Jerusalem and his apology at the Western Wall as a presage of the arrival of the anti-Christ.<sup>28</sup>

### *Radical Islam in Italy*

In recent years, Islam has taken roots in Italy, with a burgeoning community of approximately 1 million Muslims, mostly immigrants from North Africa, the Middle East, and to a smaller extent

sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Among Islamic information outlets there are some radical websites reproducing inflammatory material.

One of the most virulent antisemitic websites by far is the Swedish-based Radio Islam, offering a variety of links and material in Italian – some translations, and some the original works of Italian contributors. Radio Islam offers information on Islam, Zionism, ‘Jewish power’, the *Protocols* (with a full Italian version of the forgery and an appendix), a section on ‘Jewish terrorism’ replicating extreme right-wing accusations of Jewish terrorism against French Holocaust deniers and *Front Nationale* activists,<sup>29</sup> and links on Holocaust denial.<sup>30</sup>

Radio Islam shares an aversion to ‘worldism’.<sup>31</sup> An article on the Italian website defines ‘worldism’ as

a political-cultural conception that is carried out and spread by powerful occult technocratic-plutocratic groups, which are, to say the least, hidden from the spotlight; in other words, from the cunningly manoeuvred mass media, which highlight the great international arena. These groups operate through equally shadowy institutions.

The culprits include the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations and the international banking system. Their goal is imposing a world government that controls and monopolises economic, political and religious power. Its instruments are the creation of integrated systems (such as the European common market). Seizure of control will subjugate humankind and keep it under the yoke of ‘the diabolical mechanisms of the Great Usury’.<sup>32</sup>

Needless to say, the roots and inspiration of this diabolical attempt to dominate the world originate in masonry and Judaism, whose historical vicissitudes are inextricably entangled. Judaism eventually turned this heritage into a precious instrument of world domination.<sup>33</sup> As the author explains, this is the theoretical framework one needs to understand the ‘worldist phenomenon’.<sup>34</sup> The article, unavailable on the much richer English website, is but one example of the growing convergence of antisemitic rhetoric, to say nothing of the political agenda, of right-wing, Catholic fundamentalist and Islamist extremism. It is the common aversion to Jews as the agents behind phenomena that ideologically disparate groups oppose that explains the shared rhetoric and possibly creates grounds for political cooperation.

### *The extreme Left*

The extreme Left is also very active concerning the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, as a rallying cry in the struggle against globalisation and for peace and ‘global justice’. Antisemitic stereotypes occasionally surface. However, unlike extreme right and Catholic fundamentalist websites, the rhetoric is usually anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist and Marxist. Thus, it is harder to find direct references to Jews as a group, although Jewish figures appear, Jewish capital is frequently, if obliquely, referred to, and the Arab masses are offered support against Israel because they are considered victims of imperialism, of which Israel and Zionism are the principal instrument in the Middle East.

The left-wing website *Fondazione Nino Pasti*<sup>35</sup> has a special section on Palestine, offering links to various Palestinian rejectionist organisations, including Hamas, and to works by the late Israel Shamir, whose material often bordered on antisemitism.<sup>36</sup> Among the articles available, one by Claudio Moffa discusses Israel’s ‘covert role’ in supporting Islamist extremism and suggests the presence of an Israeli ‘shadow’ behind 9/11.<sup>37</sup> Moffa argues that 9/11 served Israeli interests and claims ‘there is evidence, shaky though it may be, of operational convergence between Mossad and bin Laden, and, on the other hand, strong evidence of Israeli and Zionist support for Islamist extremism: in Chechnya, Bosnia and Kosovo’.<sup>38</sup> Moffa offers as evidence the argument, based on unquoted articles, that the UCK, the Kosovo and Macedonian Albanian guerrilla force, ‘is notoriously financed by George Soros; whereas the Israeli-Muslim alliance in Bosnia is well established’. Another piece of evidence is the ‘puppeteer of the Islamic guerrilla’ Boris Berezovsky, as the author labels him, who according to Moffa is a ‘Jewish financier’ who works

for the Yeltsin family, is the president of the Moscow synagogue and has Israeli citizenship. This is then used to 'prove' Israeli financial support for the Chechen guerrillas. As for 9/11, Moffa concludes that the right question to ask, given that Israel in his view benefited from it, is 'to whose advantage?' He offers a number of 'damning pieces of evidence' that prove, 'beyond reasonable doubt', that 9/11 was planned by Israel through a vast network of Jewish connections involving Mossad and a 'Jewish financier' who won a lucrative deal out of the collapse of the twin towers.<sup>39</sup>

Other sites have similar features: Arcipelago ([www.arcipelago.org](http://www.arcipelago.org)), Che Fare ([www.tightrope.it/user/chefare/index.htm](http://www.tightrope.it/user/chefare/index.htm)) and Nuovi Mondi Media ([www.nuovimondimedia.it](http://www.nuovimondimedia.it)) frequently compare Israeli actions and policies to those of Nazism. Israel's policies are described as genocide and ethnic cleansing, and the rhetoric of anti-imperialism justifies both suicide bombing and armed struggle, including the need to support 'resistance' in all its forms to fight oppression. All sites call for organised economic boycotts against both Israeli companies and anyone involved in business and economic cooperation with Israel, as a way to expose the contradictions of capitalism, lead to Israeli collapse and thus aid the 'oppressed Arab proletarian masses'. Several articles make reference to antisemitism, in order to deny any linkage between the Left and anti-Jewish prejudice. Just as common themes feature prominently in all ideological groupings, so too do materials overlap with ideas and their authors appearing interchangeably on Islamic, Fascist, leftist and Catholic fundamentalist sites.

Cooperation between ideologically diverse forces exists only rhetorically: some Fascist groups have offered support for Saddam Hussein and Hamas; communist websites have exalted the most radical Palestinian and Arab rejectionists, including Islamic fundamentalists, and defined Arab masses in the Middle East, as well as Muslim immigrants in Europe, as the new oppressed proletariat, constituting a natural ally in the struggle against world capitalism and imperialism. Jews are often accused of being behind both; the likelihood of cooperation in common struggles against enemies often united by their perceived association with the Jews should not be ruled out.<sup>40</sup> In recent years all groups have increasingly converged on opposition to war in Iraq, support for the Palestinian struggle and anti-global activism. This convergence, which currently offers only common rhetoric and limited operational cooperation, has taken up an entirely new dimension with the political cooperation of some groups in fighting the European elections of June 2004. Then, recently, a gathering of anti-global groups was hosted in Beirut by Hizbullah, underscoring the development of this cooperation beyond the mere level of street demonstrations and protest campaigns on common themes.<sup>41</sup> Alliances across the ideological divide are not new to Europe: the 1970s witnessed internationalist frenzy among extremists who often coalesced with Third World terror and guerrilla groups in their common fight against the United States and the West (Israel included). A recurrence of that model, where European terrorist groups trained together with Palestinian terrorists and in some cases ran joint operations against 'common enemies', should not be excluded for the future. Not only do these groups find common ground on account of a common enemy, but also, despite their very different ideological origins, they share much more than they disagree on in their worldview. Their shared hatred for globalisation, their fear of America, their infatuation with revolution (with Palestine having become the equivalent of Vietnam and Che Guevara in the 1960s) and their sympathy for the enemies of the West are all ingredients that could, under the right circumstances, help overcome ideological differences. A convergence of ideological opposites is not to be discounted and its consequences not to be underestimated, given that what unites these disparate groups is, more than anything else, their hatred for Jews, Israel and America.

### **Mainstream media: prejudice, images and stereotypes**

While extremists remain unrepentant about their anti-Jewish sentiments, they are also peripheral in their influence: they remain on the fringes of society, as do the virulent form of hatred they voice. However, mainstream media add to the climate of hostility toward Jews without openly

adopting traditional antisemitism. Instead, they describe the Palestinian–Israeli dispute according to certain criteria, which occasionally reinforce a number of prejudices and misperceptions about Israel and the Jews. Thus, antisemitism makes its way into mainstream acceptable opinions through the filter of the Palestinian–Israeli dispute.

The use of traditional anti-Jewish Christian imagery to describe the conflict is particularly disturbing, because its main result is to turn the Palestinians into the new Jesus and, by default, the Jews into the proverbial Christ-killers. A prominent example is a cartoon published by the Italian national daily *La Stampa* around Easter 2002 – while Israel’s siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was under way. In the cartoon, baby Jesus appears, sticking his head out of the manger, staring in disbelief as a tank with a Star of David fast (and threateningly) approaches. Jesus screams, ‘What, are they here to kill me again?!’<sup>42</sup>

Easter was always a time of dread for Jews in pre-Enlightenment Europe, when the ancient accusation that Jews were ‘Christ-killers’ was revived, all too often accompanied by the beating, harassing and killing of Jews. The imagery evoked is thus unmistakable. Jews are depicted as killing Jesus ‘again’. Jesus represents the Palestinians holed up inside the church, an analogy suggested by the timing, the events on the ground and the presence of an Israeli tank – and there were indeed Israeli tanks around the Church of the Nativity at the time.

As it happens, the cartoon appeared at Easter, the holiday marking Jesus’s crucifixion, suggesting that the Palestinians are the new victims of the Jews, and perpetuating the ancient blood libel under a new disguise. The aim is to deny Israel its legitimacy, just as the old accusation of deicide was part of a theology meant to prove that Israel’s covenant with God had been supplanted by the coming of the Christ, and that the Jews, having killed the Messiah, had been punished by exile and the loss of their land. In addition, the cartoon casts the Jews as cruel murderers of Jesus and the Palestinians as the sacrificial lamb, defining the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians as a struggle between innocence and wickedness, good and evil, light and darkness.

A similar message is conveyed by occasional comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany in the mainstream media, a comparison that is reflected in the surveys noted earlier. Use of the Holocaust as an analogy for Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians implies that Israelis are the new Nazis and the Palestinians the new Jews. The equivalence between victims and murderers has important implications: it belittles the Holocaust and it provides a retroactive justification for the Holocaust. Equating what Nazis did to Jews to what the Jews are supposedly doing to the Palestinians gives credibility and legitimacy to the call for war against Israel until its destruction as a Jewish state has been accomplished, and provides justification for terrorism, once these sentiments are disguised as expression of a legitimate grievance.

Another mainstream manifestation of antisemitism is the frequent use of Jewish symbols often violently portrayed to characterise Israel’s policies.<sup>43</sup> Such symbols often convey the idea that Israel (and the Jews, given the conflation) is engaged in abominable acts. The attribution of such acts to Israel through the use of Jewish symbols leaves no space for a clear distinction between legitimate, though harsh, criticism of Israel, and incitement against the Jews.

The notion of Jewish power behind world crises, exemplified by the idea of the ‘Jewish lobby’ running Washington and its foreign policy, frequently appears in mainstream news items. This theme appeared in a March 2004 article addressing the question of unfound weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and alluded to Jewish influence behind the war in Iraq.<sup>44</sup> As the article in the left-leaning *Il Manifesto* surmised,

Behind this glowing heap of lies there was a special intelligence unit of the Pentagon, called the *Office of Special Plans*. And behind the *Office* there was Undersecretary for Defense Douglas Feith, one of the deviant minds of the *neocons*, who created the *Office* after September 11 (and behind Feith, for a plentiful supply of all that great mass of ‘evidence’ there was the Israeli government). It was these guys who held the briefings that matter in the offices of Cheney and Rice.<sup>45</sup>

This is the theme of the *neocons* as great warmongering puppeteers, themselves puppets of the Israeli government, which, through its Jewish connections in Washington ('neocon' has become a covert euphemism for 'Jewish') runs US foreign policy to pursue its own, not America's, interests in the Middle East. Here is an example of how the conspiratorial nature of antisemitic theories on extreme websites eventually percolates into mainstream public discourse.

### **Liberal discourse on the Arab–Israeli conflict and Europe's Jews**

Despite the unsettling evidence presented in this chapter, one should not lose sight of the positive aspects of Europe's and Italy's relationship with the Jews: today's Europe is nothing like the 1930s. In fact, this comparison is offensive, because the attempt to demonise today's antisemitism ends up by trivialising its much more sinister Nazi strain. In the 1930s, antisemitism was endorsed by Church and State. Today both condemn it, legally and theologically. Then, laws promoted antisemitism; today they prosecute it as a prejudice that neither society nor institutions openly condone. Police enforced anti-Jewish legislation; today police protect Jewish institutions from anti-Jewish extremists and terrorists. Governments harassed Jews into submission and poverty before they shepherded them to Auschwitz. Jews were robbed of everything before they were robbed of life. By contrast, today's Europe is actively supporting a Jewish renaissance: Italy is no exception. Along with the rest of Europe, institutional Italy not only condemns antisemitism, but also educates its new generations about the evils of Nazism and the Shoah. There is a legislated memorial day, 27 January, the lessons of yesteryear being integral to today's national ethos. There is no institutional antisemitism and there is an active commitment to fight prejudice in Italian society on the part of institutions and authorities. Occasional episodes, even the gravest ones, are rarely characterised by violence, typically indicating that Italian antisemitism has a 'low level of aggressiveness'.<sup>46</sup> There is a latent prejudice, which emerges in conjunction with the Arab–Israeli conflict and is often conflated with broader phenomena of extremism, such as anti-Americanism and anti-globalisation rhetoric, but it fails to reach levels that a comparison with the 1930s suggests.

Today's real challenge is to have society recognise that extremism does not only dwell in the usual places – on the extreme and xenophobic Right – but has the potential to emerge elsewhere, including among the tolerant Left, whose condemnation of traditional antisemitism has become central to its identity and self-image. This form of 'mainstream extremism' is characterised by the sudden descent into the irrational, which discussion of Israel – and by extension the United States – often entails. The refusal to respect views that strain the conventional wisdom about Israel expresses an obsessive and intolerant attitude about a controversial issue that deserves more, not less, debate, and an alarming tendency to disregard one of democracy's central values – namely, the protection of dissent. The narrowing of margins of debate on Israel has a stifling effect on pro-Israel voices and heralds the return of a quasi-totalitarian mindset – *la pensée unique* – with negative implications for those Jews, in Italy as in the rest of Europe, for whom Israel is a central element of Jewish identity.

Under the disguise of anti-Israel or anti-imperialist rhetoric, extremism – including antisemitism – has become a respectable point of view. Frequent antisemitic overtones and imageries – sometimes disguised as conspiracy theories about what drives American foreign policy – should be exposed and considered for what they are: a symptom of a broader malaise in certain types of political discourse. Failure to do so is a sign of a lack of appreciation of the phenomenon and of the fact that disapproving of Israel's conduct is perfectly legitimate, but doing so through the use of antisemitic stereotypes reflects prejudice, not legitimate criticism.

The need to expose this phenomenon is evident: there is a tendency to downplay antisemitism by associating it exclusively with either radicalised members of Arab and Muslim immigrant communities or extreme right-wing groups, and to dismiss accusations of antisemitism as attempts to gag critics of Israel's policies. No doubt not all that Israel does is right. But while violent acts are associated with certain groups, home-grown prejudice contributes to a climate of

hostility – even in Italy, despite the low incidence of attacks – and it often intersects with openly antisemitic remarks made in the context of the discourse on the Palestine question, which help create a climate of fear and complicity with extremists' actions.

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### NOTES

- 1 See Emanuele Ottolenghi, 'L'Europa predilige l'ebreo-vittima', *Il Foglio*, 28 June 2003.
- 2 Two polls were taken, in 2002 and 2004. The 2002 poll is divided into two: one five-country poll was done in June 2002 (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, the UK); see [http://www.adl.org/anti\\_semitism/European\\_Attitudes.pdf](http://www.adl.org/anti_semitism/European_Attitudes.pdf); a second one, covering Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland, was done in September 2002; see [http://www.adl.org/anti\\_semitism/EuropeanAttitudesPoll-10-02.pdf](http://www.adl.org/anti_semitism/EuropeanAttitudesPoll-10-02.pdf). The 2004 poll, *Attitudes Toward Jews, Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict in Ten European Countries*, April 2004, is available at [http://www.adl.org/anti\\_semitism/european\\_attitudes\\_april\\_2004.pdf](http://www.adl.org/anti_semitism/european_attitudes_april_2004.pdf).
- 3 The aim of the surveys was to measure traditional antisemitic stereotypes and then ascertain, through a measurement of attitudes to the Arab-Israeli conflict, whether there is a spillover effect. This approach is justified by the emerging trend in which the rate of anti-Jewish incidents is directly correlated to the ebb and flow of the Middle East conflict.
- 4 Numbers in parentheses indicate positive responses to the same question in 2002.
- 5 ADL Survey 2004, p. 22.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Flash Eurobarometer 151, European Commission, *Iraq and Peace in the World*, November 2003. The much-criticised poll was conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres/EOS Gallup Europe—also authors of the ADL surveys.
- 8 Ibid., p. 80.
- 9 All other countries scored above 50 per cent; the Netherlands had the highest score, 74 per cent.
- 10 Some criticism might have been politically motivated, owing to the fact that Romano Prodi, outgoing president of the European Commission, was seen as a leading challenger to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's governing coalition. See Emanuele Ottolenghi, 'Eurobarometro ha sbagliato ma ha colto nel segno: l'antisemitismo c'è', *Il Foglio*, 6 November 2003, p. 2.
- 11 Available at [http://www.corriere.it/Primo\\_Piano/Cronache/2003/11\\_Novembre/10/israele.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Cronache/2003/11_Novembre/10/israele.shtml).
- 12 See Ansa press release, 15 January 2004: *Antisemitismo: Italiani poco malati ma virus c'è, studio Ansa-Eurispes, ci sono aree di possibile incubazione pregiudizio*. Ansa is an Italian news wire agency.
- 13 *Corriere della Sera*, 26 January 2004.
- 14 Ansa press release, 15 January 2004.
- 15 As the *Guardian*'s leader argued on 26 January 2002. See leader, 'A new Antisemitism? Not to Be Confused with Anti-Sharonism', *Guardian* (London) 26 January 2002.
- 16 In 2004 it was down to 53 per cent.
- 17 See, for example, Centro Tradizione e Comunità. Adsum.it at [www.adsum.it](http://www.adsum.it).
- 18 See, for example, the Thule website, at [www.geocities.com/societathule/index.htm](http://www.geocities.com/societathule/index.htm), with a virtual library offering antisemitic material. Thule is inspired by the Thule Gesellschaft, a cult-like group established in 1919 that played a role in Nazi Germany.
- 19 'Mondialismo' in Italian, from the words *mondo*, world, and *mondiale*, worldwide.

- 20 As long as they stay where they are: some of these same websites strongly oppose Turkey's entry into Europe and take virulent anti-immigration stands.
- 21 All the information about FN is drawn from its unofficial website at [www.forzanuova.net](http://www.forzanuova.net).
- 22 <http://it.geocities.com/brigatanera88/home.htm>.
- 23 <http://it.geocities.com/brigatanera88/home.htm>, under the rubric 'Articoli', 'Ebrei' and 'Sionismo'. Incidentally, this definition is reminiscent of Hitler's exegesis of Zionism in *Mein Kampf*.
- 24 Marco Battarra, 'Five Years of Intifadah', *Aurora*, no. 2, January 1993, available at <http://members.xoom.virgilio.it/aurora/AURORA1.htm>.
- 25 Originally published in the monthly official magazine of the MFL: Fascist Editorial, 'Regarding Iraq', *Il Lavoro Fascista*, no. 2, February 2003, Year II.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 [www.holywar.org](http://www.holywar.org).
- 28 [www.holywar.org/indextradiz.html](http://www.holywar.org/indextradiz.html).
- 29 Authored by Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson, [www.radioislam.net/islam/italiano/faur/terror.htm](http://www.radioislam.net/islam/italiano/faur/terror.htm).
- 30 The much broader selection on the English version of the website offers material from David Duke.
- 31 Maurizio Lattanzio, 'Il mondialismo', at [www.radioislam.net/islam/italiano/potere/mond.htm](http://www.radioislam.net/islam/italiano/potere/mond.htm).
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 The much broader selection on the English website version offers a country-by-country link to 'Jewish power' and 'the Jewish lobby'.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Available at [www.pasti.org](http://www.pasti.org).
- 36 [www.israelshamir.net/articles\\_italian.html](http://www.israelshamir.net/articles_italian.html).
- 37 Claudio Moffa, 'I tre aspetti "soggettivi" dell'unitarietà dei teatri di crisi afgano e palestinese. La cosiddetta nuova "Yalta", il sostegno sionista all'estremismo islamico e l'ombra di Israele negli attacchi dell'11 settembre,' available at [www.pasti.org/moffa.htm](http://www.pasti.org/moffa.htm).
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 See, for example, Amir Taheri, 'The London Streets', *National Review Online*, 18 November 2003; 'The Red-Black Alliance', in *Jerusalem Post*, 10 June 2004; 'Europe's Islamist Alliance', *Jerusalem Post*, 12 July 2004; Nick Cohen, 'Saddam's Very Own Party', *New Statesman*, 7 June 2004.
- 41 Ely Carmon, 'HIZBALLAH AND THE ANTIGLOBALIZATION MOVEMENT: A NEW COALITION?', *Policy Watch*, no. 949, Washington Institute, 27 January 2005.
- 42 *La Stampa*, 18 April 2002.
- 43 See the cartoon that appeared on [www.al-jazira.it](http://www.al-jazira.it), 'I rastrellamenti continuano'. The cartoon bears the signature of Nico Pillimini, cartoonist for the Italian daily *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*.
- 44 M.M., 'Scaricabarile CIA', *Il Manifesto*, 11 March 2004.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Adriana Goldstaub, Director, CDEC, *Address to the Annual Congress of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI)*, 23 June 2002.