Antisemitism and Insurgency Politics

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In a deeply personal account of the impact of Donald Trump's presidential candidacy upon his network of professional and social relationships, the conservative academic Tom Nichols leveled an eyebrow-raising assertion. "Trump is worse than Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama," Nichols wrote [1] . "Their policies are liberal, even leftist, often motivated by cheap politics, ego, and political grandstanding. But they are policies, understandable as such and opposable by political means."

American readers will, before anything else, regard this argument as reflecting the deep, perhaps irreparable, schisms within the Republican Party provoked by Trump's campaign for the White House. But it can also be observed that Nichols' specific anxiety over Trump addresses a more fundamental aspect of the character of politics today, not just in the United States, but in Europe as well. And it is one in which "the Jews," understood as a conscious, organized collective actively pursuing sectarian goals that clash with broader national interests, play a central role.

Since the turn of the century, the conduct of politics in the western democracies has developed the characteristics of an insurgency, spurred by individuals and social movements who loudly revile established institutions, processes and parties. In and of itself, this is a healthy impulse. Politicians are not a protected species and neither are transnational institutions, whether private investment banks or governmental bureaucracies such as the European Union. Still, as Tom

Nichols highlighted in the case of Trump, there is a discernible shift towards a discursive stridency that elevates factors like personal identity and group grievance – whether genuine or contrived ¬– far above such dull activities as consensus building and bipartisan policy formulation.

This phenomenon is hardly new, of course. Ever since the American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth century, democratic polities have regularly weathered the peaks and troughs of political insurgencies from right and left. One of the many lessons we have learned is that such political currents almost never contribute to a general sense of well-being among Jews. To the contrary, what post-Enlightenment Jewish history has shown time and again is that Jewish communities fare best when political life gravitates towards the center. For when it doesn't, antisemitism, with its fantasy of Jewish collective malice, invariably rears its head.

Hence the heightened sense of worry that has dogged Jewish attitudes towards the 2016 presidential election. While past elections have featured sharp differences over American policy towards the State of Israel, what has made this one distinctive is the focus on the underlying attitudes of at least two of the main candidates towards Jewish sensitivities. As an overview of both Trump's campaign and that of Sen. Bernie Sanders on the Democratic side demonstrates, neither man has been afraid of courting those segments of public opinion that have actively alienated Jewish voters, despite whatever else might separate them.

In the early part of the year, as Trump's campaign overwhelmed such mainstream figures as Gov. Jeb Bush and Sen. Marco Rubio, media outlets fell over themselves in their bid to discover the who, the how and the why behind the New York billionaire's growing support. As the layers were peeled back, the term "alt-right," hitherto familiar only to students of political extremism, entered the mainstream lexicon within the context of the Trump campaign.

The "alternative right," to spell out its name in full, is very much a creature of the digital age. A cluster of obscure blogs, websites, social media feeds and ertswhile "think-tanks," the alt-right delights in offending liberal sensibilities over such core matters as race and gender. Not surprisingly, it has provided a home for wandering white power activists and Holocaust deniers, who find common ground with the newer voices that have coined such terms as "Weimerica" (a term commonly used on the Radix Journal website that fuses the word "America" with "Weimar," the unofficial designation of the German republic between the First and Second World Wars.) The implication of this term is that American democracy is as unstable and rotten as it was in Germany before Hitler's rise to power.

A much cited article on the pro-Trump Breitbart website noted that the movement is inspired by such thinkers as Oswald Spengler, the German nationalist who penned "The Decline of the West" in 1918, and Julius Evola, the Italian philosopher whose writings on race were acclaimed by Nazi ideologues[2] . According to the authors of the Breitbart piece, Trump's candidacy has been hailed by the alt-right because he is the "first truly cultural candidate for President since [Pat] Buchanan, [which] suggests grassroots appetite for more robust protection of the western European and American way of life."

Phrases like these leave many Jews shuddering under the weight of historical memory. Even so, Trump was indifferent to these concerns, impatiently waving away protests that he had failed to adequately distance himself from the endorsement of David Duke, the former Ku Klux Klan leader, and even sharing messages of support from self-declared Nazis on his Twitter platform. When the journalist Julia Ioffe, who happens to be Jewish, published a magazine feature that presented Trump's wife, Melania, in a less than flattering light, Trump supporters bombarded Ioffe with threats about gas chambers, images of Jews being executed, and anonymous phone calls consisting of recorded Hitler speeches[3] . By not condemning this nakedly antisemitic harassment, let alone recognizing that it was taking place, Trump and his advisors seemed to be encouraging it.

Above all, what the relationship of political currents like the alt-right with Trump represents is the shattering of the taboo around racism that evolved in the aftermath of the Second World War. It is not that Trump positively identifies with national socialists or their fellow travelers. Rather, he does not feel obliged to reject their support and apparently does not believe that having them among his backers could cost him votes. It has certainly been a long time since far right extremists enjoyed such a degree of legitimacy.

A broadly similar pattern has unfolded on the left, around the Sanders campaign. As with Trump and the alt-right, it involves a term that most Americans have been unfamiliar with, but which is well-known to supporters and detractors of the State of Israel: "BDS," or "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions," referring to the toxic campaign that presents Israel as this century's incarnation of apartheid South Africa. BDS seeks an economic and cultural quarantine of the Jewish homeland as a prelude to its eventual replacement by an Arab state stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the River Jordan.

Advocacy of BDS is not uniform on the left, but its influence is such that very few leftists are prepared to identify it for what it is – an antisemitic movement that regards the Jewish homeland as the pivot of global ills and therefore seeks the

undoing of the national self-determination in Eretz Israel achieved, against gargantuan odds that included Arab invasion and British sabotage, by the pre-state yishuv.

By conventional measures, BDS has been a failure, as its effect on Israel's thriving economy has been negligible. But by the standards of insurgent politics, in which the repetition of discursive themes is valued more than practical results, it has been quite a success. After all, while Sanders has said that he is personally opposed to a boycott of Israel, he has not disavowed those among his supporters who urge one. Like Trump with the alt-right, Sanders has shown little patience for critics who demand that he adopt a morally-grounded stance against BDS.

In early April, the Sanders campaigned hired a recent graduate, Simone Zimmerman, as its co-ordinator of national outreach to the Jewish community. Zimmerman was already known as a prominent Jewish critic of Israel on campus who had led protests against the decision of Hillel, the Jewish student organization, to decline the hosting of speakers advocating BDS. But within a day of her appointment, media scrutiny led by the Washington Free Beacon newsaper brought attention to Zimmerman's publicly-available Facebook account.

Posts from March 2015 revealed online indiscretions so serious that the Sanders campaign felt compelled to fire Zimmerman. In two separate screeds aimed at Benjamin Netanyahu, Zimmerman showered the Israeli Prime Minister with expletives and accused Israel of the "state-sanctioned murder of 2,000 people" during the war launched by the Hamas regime in Gaza in the summer of 2014.

As screenshots of Zimmerman's posts flew across the internet, it rapidly became clear that her role as the principal interface between the Sanders campaign and the Jewish community was untenable: while divisions in the community over Israel are self-evident, there is near unity in rejecting the malicious allegations of IDF "war crimes" in Gaza emanating from the BDS network. But even as it abruptly terminated Zimmerman's employment, the Sanders campaign only distanced itself from her remarks, rather than condemning them outright. The campaign also declared, rather dubiously for some observers, that it had been "unaware" of her posts, which suggests at best that its vetting procedures were somewhat lax.

Undergirding the controversy was a more profound truth: that the Sanders campaign hired Zimmerman because it largely agreed with her views on Israel, and because Jews who disavow Israel are particularly prized in the left-wing activist circles like MoveOn.org and the relaunched Occupy Wall Street that have flocked to the Vermont senator. Even more importantly, one week before the

Zimmerman affair, Sanders told a meeting of the New York Daily News editorial board that he believed "10,000" Palestinians had been killed during the 2014 war, and then immediately turned to his aides to ask them whether that number was correct. What the Sanders campaign later insisted was a slip of the tongue might also be a telling glimpse into the mindset that assumes, on first reflection, a maximal level of Israeli state criminality.

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The simultaneous rise of anti-capitalist, isolationist, protectionist, nativist and xenophobic trends around the Trump and Sanders campaigns – hardly for the first time in the history of the United States – represents before anything else a challenge to the meaning of liberty in contemporary America. Political insurgencies are also social movements, and their highly-charged ideologies periodically find charismatic individuals to coalesce around, as occurred in 2016. That antisemitism reared its head in the present environment was therefore entirely predictable.

Yet it needs to be stressed that the fundamental reality enjoyed by American Jews, who contine to thrive in public life and as a community, stands in marked contast to Europe, where the conditions for insurgency politics have been historically more favorable.

The European Union is currently in the throes of an existential crisis, gravely deepened by the financial disaster in Greece and the surge of national sovereignty movements in Britain and elsewhere demanding the withdrawal of their countries from the EU. Unemployment remains disturbingly high in member states like Spain and Greece, approaching 25% of the workforce, while the continental average is almost double that of the United States. Centrist parties of left and right have been battered or transformed beyond recognition by extremists in their ranks. Finally, the visceral rejection by the progressive left and nationalist right of any foreign military involvement has emboldened Russian militarism. It has strengthened the resolve of Islamist terror groups in attacking cities like Paris and Brussels. It has fueled antagonism to the continent's growing Muslim population, most recently boosted by an influx of refugees fleeing the criminal atrocities of Bashar al Assad's regime and Islamist factions like Da'esh in Syria.

In tandem with these broader developments, Jewish communities have undergone the greatest crisis of confidence and security since the Second World War. Every community has a tale to tell. In more than a decade of monitoring contemporary

antisemitism, I have encountered Neo-Nazis and fascist paramilitaries in Hungary and Greece, attempts to ban Judaic requirements like brit milah and shechita on ostensibly "humanitarian" grounds in Scandinavia, Germany and Poland, deadly terror attacks and kidnapping in France and Belgium, and vicious political invective against Israel's very existence in the United Kingdom and Spain, among several others.

As a whole, then, Europe has emerged as the site where the most insidious antisemitic obsessions ¬¬– symbolized, as George Orwell memorably put it in his 1945 essay, "Antisemitism in Britain," by the "ability to believe stories that could not possibly be true" – have been revived and remodeled. Among them: that Jews are wealthier than everyone else (the rationale behind the 2006 kidnapping and murder of Ilan Halimi, a Jewish cellphone salesman, by a largely Muslim gang in Paris;) that Jews are offensively tribal (hence the universalist moralizing behind attempts to ban circumcision in Germany and Norway;) that Jewish loyalties are inherently suspect (a calumny at least as old as the Dreyfus trial of 1894, once again in vogue within the framework of public vilification of Israel;) that Zionism is a global conspiracy (a propaganda meme that was first developed in the Soviet Union and then imported into western Europe by the far left in the late 1960s.)

Most glaring of all is the trend of antisemitism denial. The wildly disproportionate presence of Jewish targets among those selected for attack by jihadi terrorists – among them the Ozar Hatorah school in Toulouse in March 2012, the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, and the Hypercacher kosher market in Paris in January 2015 – has done little to stem the accusation, especially pronounced from the ranks of the political left, that Jews charge Israel's adversaries with antisemitism in order to deflect their justified attacks on the Jewish state's raison d'etre. In Europe's universities and labor unions especially, the idea that antisemitism is a ruse to tear the public gaze away from the Palestinian plight has become an in-built assumption.

The European politician most associated with this practice is Ken Livingstone, the former Mayor of London. Livingstone's antipathy towards the Jewish community has been repeatedly displayed over nearly four decades. In the mid-1980s, he edited a Marxist newspaper that published antisemitic caricatures of the then Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, wearing a Nazi uniform; it is striking that similar images appeared in Soviet newspapers of the time, such as Izvestia.

More than twenty years later, Livingstone's attitude to Jews again became the center of national attention when, during an altercation with a Jewish journalist, he made a sarcastic comparison with a "concentration camp guard," refusing to

apologize even after the journalist made clear that he was insulted on the grounds of his origin. This year, meanwhile, Livingstone has come to personify the eruption of antisemitism within the British Labour Party following the election of a far left parliamentarian, Jeremy Corbyn, as its leader in 2015.

The cause of this latest scandal was Livingstone's defense of a Labour Party colleague accused of antisemitism after she endorsed a social media campaign to "relocate" Israel to the United States (that senior politicians in one of the world's venerable democracies actually entertain such proposals is conceivably an even more disturbing element here, though one beyond the scope of this essay.) During the course of fighting his colleague's corner, Livingstone expressed the libel that Adolf Hitler had been a supporter of Zionism. In the furore that followed, Livingstone was suspended from the Labour Party, but Corbyn, his long-time ally, pointedly refused to highlight the offense caused by the Hitler claim.

Again, the ongoing political battles in the Labour Party should not obscure the lasting significance of this latest controversy involving Livingstone. Livingstone sincerely believes he is correct about Hitler because his ideological hatred of Zionism predisposes him to that judgement. Like those who deny the Holocaust outright, no amount of historical evidence will persuade him otherwise, because his standards of truth are determined not empirically, but by a heavy ideological bias.

That is one reason why Livingstone has denied the presence of antisemitism during every single one of his clashes with British Jews. Indeed, his reputation for adopting the discursive tactic led the eminent British sociologist David Hirsh to coin the term "The Livingstone Formulation" as emblematic of antisemitism denial[4] . As Livingstone put in 2006, "For far too long the accusation of antisemitism has been used against anyone who is critical of policies of the Israeli government, as I have been."

On both sides of the Atlantic, in legislative assemblies and lecture halls, at political rallies and on social media, some version of this form of words is heard with increasing frequency. That is, perhaps, an appropriate observation with which to end this brief survey. Anyone examining antisemitism at the global level needs to be careful not to generalize the condition of one country as the condition of all. But these transnational trends in Europe show American Jews not just what to look out for in terms of concrete threats. They must be cognizant, as well, of the tendency to portray antisemitism as a phantom prejudice that exists only in the Jewish imagination – and therefore one more proof, as an antisemite would have it, of the Jewish penchant for deceiving gentiles.

[1] Tom Nichols, "If I lose friends over Trump, so be it," The Federalist, April 26, 2016,
available at http://thefederalist.com/2016/04/26/if-i-lose-friends-over-trump-so-be-...
[2] Allum Bokhari and Mialo Yiannopoulous, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," Breibart, March 29, 2016, available at http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives...
[3] Sara Ashley O'Brien, "Trolls Target Journalist After Melania Trump GQ Article," CNN, April 29, 2016, available at http://money.cnn.com/2016/04/29/technology/julia-ioffe-online-harassmen...
[4] David Hirsh, "The Livingstone Formulation, ‘playing the antisemitism card’ and contesting the boundaries of antiracist discourse," Transversal 1/2010, available at https://engageonline.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/4958_transversal_2010_...