

# The resurgence of antisemitism

An interview with Berlin-based Prof. Monika Schwarz-Friesel

By Marc Neugröschel

**STATISTICS INDICATE** a dramatic rise in antisemitism everywhere in the world. The brutal murder of Holocaust survivor Mireille Knoll last year in Paris and the murder of 11 worshipers in the attack on the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh last October are only the devastating peaks of this development. Germany's antisemitism czar recently warned that it is not safe for Jews to wear *kippot* in certain areas.

In February, French President Emanuel Macron said that antisemitism has reached its highest level since World War II.

"We have predicted this development for a long time, but our warnings were dismissed as alarmism," says Monika Schwarz-Friesel, a professor of cognitive science at the Technical University of Berlin and one of the world's leading antisemitism researchers. She blames Israel-related antisemitism and the failure of politicians, scholars, civil society and the media to address it. In an interview with *The Jerusalem Report*, Schwarz-Friesel also talks about the results of her recent research on online antisemitism and her new book, *Jew-hatred on the Internet: Antisemitism as cultural constant and collective sentiment*. (The title is translated from the German.)

**Where is the current explosion of antisemitism coming from?**

We are waking up to a reality that has developed over a long time. Antisemitism was never really gone. There was a period after World War II when its open communication was suppressed, but that doesn't mean that it was erased from people's minds. It only mutated into new forms, among which Israel-related antisemitism became the most pervasive and influential. The latter, very prominently promoted, e.g. by the BDS movement, has been instrumental in making Jew-hatred respectable again by whitewashing it as criticism of Israel. That whole process was never really challenged. On the contrary, everything has been tried to deny and marginalize it. Now we are facing the consequences.

**Are you saying that the present situation was predictable?**

Indeed so. I can read out for you the minutes of a symposium in which I participated 10 years ago in Jena, Germany, and you would think that they were written today. We made it very clear, back then, that Israel-related antisemitism is increasingly promoting the dissemination, radicalization and social acceptance of Jew-hatred. We explicitly warned that lest decisive counter-measures are taken, there will be an eruption and normalization of antisemitism. No one heeded our warnings. Instead, they were dismissed as alarmism. The fight against antisemitism remained focused on the activities of right-wing neo-Nazis, who in fact have very little influence on society as a whole. In contrast, Israel-related antisemitism and its massive popular impact were ignored. I clearly blame politicians, civil society and the media for ignoring, belittling and sometimes even participating in the dissemination of Israel-related Judeophobia.

**Recently, however, the German parliament passed a resolution against BDS and anti-Israel antisemitism.**

That resolution was a right and important decision. But I am afraid it is too little too late. It should have been passed 10 years ago.

**There are many who think that measures against the BDS campaign infringe on free speech. How do you respond to people who say that charges of antisemitism are used to silence criticism of Israel?**

Plainly, that they are wrong. Their accusation is void of any empirical merit. We actually did check this in various corpus-based studies. There is no noteworthy actor or discourse that has ever claimed that it is forbidden to criticize Israel, or that has used the charge of antisemitism to silence rational and fact-based criticism of the Jewish state's policies. The opposite is true. Barely any other country is criticized as much as Israel in the European media. Those who emphatically claim that criticism of Israel

must be allowed oppose a taboo that in reality does not exist. And they usually do so to whitewash Israel-related antisemitism.

**So how do you distinguish between criticism of Israel and Israel-related antisemitism?**

In fact, this is very simple. The line is crossed when statements about Israel reflect antisemitic stereotypes rather than the reality on the ground.

**Can you give an example?**

Let's take the recent Israeli Nation-State Law. Criticizing this law as counterproductive, unnecessary or discriminatory is certainly not antisemitic. But when people, as we have seen, label it the "new Nuremberg race laws" or a "diabolic Zionist crime," then they demonize Israel in a way that is antisemitic. Such statements are not based in reality. Instead they project stereotypical ideas of Jews as an absolute evil, by rendering the Jewish state a Nazi-like regime.

**Outbursts of antisemitism often coincide with Israeli military operations, such as the 2014 Gaza War. What role does the Middle East conflict play in promoting Jew-hatred?**

Crises in the Middle East often trigger antisemitic outbursts, but they are not their root cause. We can conclude that from our observation. Most antisemitic communications reproduce stereotypes that are much older than the Israeli-Arab conflict on which they are often projected. This also applies to antisemitism among Muslims. Mantras such as "child murderer Israel" target the Jewish state, but in fact replicate the classic antisemitic blood libel that has been around for centuries.

**Your current book covers, among other things, the results of your much acclaimed new long-term study on antisemitism online. What are your findings?**

Throughout the last decade, antisemitism on the Internet has been growing significantly. In some data sets we found an increase as high as 22 percent. In the online talkback sections of quality German newspapers, the number of antisemitic comments multiplied



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Prof. Monika Schwarz-Friesel

by four. This is accompanied by a radicalization in terms of semantics. In contrast to survey data, the Internet communications that we have reviewed are authentic, meaning they were not produced in response to the question of a researcher, but rather express the genuine impetus of their authors. So far, our study is the first of its kind in antisemitism research.

***Is there any social group that stands out in particular among the producers of antisemitic speech online?***

Our findings confirmed once more that antisemitism is not the exclusive problem of political extremists or of people with a low level of education. In fact, most antisemitic communications are authored by normal ev-

eryday users. That means that we encounter Jew-hatred everywhere on the web, and not only in confined spaces specifically dedicated to radical ideas.

***A few weeks ago YouTube announced that it would ban videos that promote Holocaust denial. Shortly before that, Facebook said it would delete the profiles of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and Islamist Louis Farrakhan. Did these measures make a difference?***

According to our observations of the past five years, things only got worse. We regularly conducted spot checks to see whether certain contents have remained or disappeared. Also after Germany's so-called Network-entrenchment law took effect in

October 2017, imposing fines on social media providers who don't comply with regulations for the restriction of hate speech, nothing substantial changed. The only thing that happens is that specific extreme cases of Holocaust denial get deleted. However, usually these contents just reappear later somewhere else. Eliminary antisemitism expressed in mantras such as "Bomb Israel!" "Destroy Israel!" or "Jews are the biggest scum on earth" is still widespread all over cyberspace. The old anti-Jewish eliminatory hate is unbroken, as if Auschwitz never happened.

***How is that possible?***

There is a very simple explanation: 2,000 years of Jew-hatred are met by no more than 50 years of very ineffective education against it. In addition, large parts of society are in denial when it comes to facing the actual scope of antisemitism. Influential people, among them also scholars, continue to oppose measures against BDS. They falsely claim that criticism of BDS is an infringement of free speech and disseminate the fairytale that charges of antisemitism are used to silence criticism of Israel. Such arguments are void of any empirical corroboration. They not only sabotage the struggle against antisemitism, but actually promote the respectability of modern Jew-hatred.

***So what can be done?***

The political world has to face the facts and base the struggle against antisemitism on scholarly research rather than on empirically unsubstantiated fantasies. This will lead us automatically to the conclusion that Israeli-related Jew-hatred has to be targeted much more decisively.

By the same token, we have to dismiss the wrong but popular idea that contemporary antisemitism equals racism or xenophobia. Antisemitism is rooted in Christianity's attempt to dismiss the Jewish basis it evolved from. As such, it has been an integral part of Western civilization for 2,000 years, deeply shaping the ways in which people think and feel. Comprehending this unique character of Jew-hatred as a cultural category sui generis rather than as one form of prejudice among others is a precondition to challenging it successfully. ■