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 remains 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 of 20 percent. In the online talkback sections of quality German newspapers, the number of antisemitic comments multiplied...
by four. This is accompanied by a radical-
ization in terms of semantics. In contrast to
survey data, the Internet communications
that we have reviewed are authentic, mean-
ing they were not produced in response to
the question of a researcher, but rather ex-
press 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 antise-
mitic 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 dedi-
cated to radical ideas.

A few weeks ago YouTube announced that
it would ban videos that promote Holo-
cast denial. Shortly before that, Face-
book said it would delete the profiles of
conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and Isla-
mist Louis Farrakhan. Did these measures
make a difference?

According to our observations of the past
five years, things only got worse. We regu-
larly conducted spot checks to see whether
certain contents have remained or disap-
peared. Also after Germany’s so-called
Network-entrenchment law took effect in
October 2017, imposing fines on social me-
dia providers who don’t comply with reg-
ulations 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. Eliminatory antisemitism
expressed in mantras such as “Bomb Isra-
el!” “Destroy Israel!” or “Jews are the big-
gest scum on earth” is still widespread all
over cyberspace. The old anti-Jewish elim-
inatory 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 soci-
ety are in denial when it comes to facing
the actual scope of antisemitism. Influential
people, among them also scholars, con-
tinue to oppose measures against BDS. They
falsely claim that criticism of BDS is an in-
fringement 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 corrob-
oration. 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 empir-
ically 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 at-
tempt 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 ge-
neris rather than as one form of prejudice
among others is a precondition to challeng-
ing it successfully.