

EUROPE | NYT NOW

Anti-Semitism Rises in Europe Amid Israel-Gaza Conflict

By MELISSA EDDY AUG. 1, 2014

BERLIN — Across Europe, the conflict in Gaza is generating a broader backlash against Jews, as threats, hate speech and even violent attacks proliferate in several countries.

Most surprising perhaps, a wave of incidents has washed over Germany, where atonement for the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes is a bedrock of the modern society. A commitment to the right of Israel to exist is ironclad. Plaques and memorials across the country exhort, “Never Again.” Children are taught starting in elementary school that their country’s Nazi history must never be repeated. Even so, academics say the recent episodes may reflect a rising climate of anti-Semitism that they had observed before the strife over Gaza.

This week, the police in the western city of Wuppertal detained two young men on suspicion of throwing firebombs at the city’s new synagogue; the attack early Tuesday caused no injuries. In Frankfurt on Thursday, the police said, a beer bottle was thrown through a window at the home of a prominent critic of anti-Semitism. She heard an anti-Jewish slur after going to the balcony to confront her assailant, The Frankfurter Rundschau reported. An anonymous caller to a rabbi threatened last week to kill 30 Frankfurt Jews if the caller’s family in Gaza was harmed, the police said.

The string of incidents comes after Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned anti-Semitic chants from pro-Palestinian demonstrators and President Joachim Gauck called on Germans to “raise their voices if there is a new anti-Semitism being strutted on the street.”

But even as the police have clamped down on demonstrators, banning slogans that target Jews instead of Israeli policies, a spike in violence has spread fear among Jews, not only in Germany but also in other European countries.

More Jews have begun leaving France in recent months, following anti-Semitism that has spilled onto the streets since the start of the Gaza conflict almost a month ago. While most of the pro-Palestinian demonstrations have been peaceful, a small number of violent protesters, many of them young Arab men, has targeted Jewish businesses and synagogues.

French authorities have strongly condemned the violence and, citing public-safety concerns, have refused to authorize a small number of pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Others have spoken of a need to counter anti-Semitism among certain segments of the country’s Muslim youth.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls spoke last week of a “new,” “normalized” anti-Semitism. “It blends the Palestinian cause, jihadism, the detestation of Israel and the hatred of France and its values,” he told the National Assembly.

Even in historically tolerant Italy, anti-Semitic smears have appeared on the streets of Rome. Jewish shop windows in several neighborhoods were defaced this week with swastikas and tags reading “Torch the synagogues” and “Jews your end is near.” Police suspect that right-wing

extremists, possibly along with pro-Palestinian activists, carried out the acts.

Riccardo Di Segni, the chief rabbi of Rome, said he believed that the threats were linked to tensions in the Middle East. “There is cyclically a common thread running between the dramatic tensions in the Middle East and the increase of anti-Semitic episodes,” he said.

In Austria, a preseason soccer match between the Israeli team Maccabi Haifa and Germany’s Paderborn was moved to a more secure location last weekend after a group of youths bearing Palestinian and Turkish flags stormed the field and attacked players during a previous match.

Prominent newspapers, politicians and popular stars in Austria and Germany have responded to the anti-Jewish outburst with a campaign called “Raise Your Voice,” in support of their countries’ Jewish communities. But Samuel Salzborn, a professor of political science at Göttingen University, does not believe that the effort has shifted public opinion.

“The official line of the German government is happily, clearly against anti-Semitism, but that is resulting in far too little,” Mr. Salzborn said. “There is a startling indifference in the German public to the current display of anti-Semitism.”

To many of the more than 100,000 Jews in Germany, the outburst of anti-Semitism since the conflict flared in Gaza has a troubling undertone and has stirred especially painful memories. The Central Council of Jews in Germany has received hundreds of calls from members asking whether they should pack their suitcases and leave the country.

“I have not heard that for many years,” said Dieter Graumann, the council president. “When calls for Jews to be gassed, burned and murdered are bawled on the streets of Germany, that no longer has anything to do with Israel’s politics and Gaza. It is the most abhorrent form of anti-Semitism.”

Academics who study anti-Semitism say the acceptance of disparaging remarks about Jews has become increasingly common in the educated middle class over the past two decades. Especially on social media, where hashtags such as #HitlerWasRight have appeared, there has been a significant jump in slurs against Jews.

Monika Schwarz-Friesel, a cognitive scientist at Technical University, has spent 10 years tracking anti-Semitic comments from educated Germans in letters to editors, in Internet chat rooms and on social media. She said such comments in public forums had served as kindling for the most recent outbreak.

“Violence always starts in the mind,” Ms. Schwarz-Friesel said. “Attacks like that on the synagogue in Wuppertal are not just pulled out of thin air.”

Carola Melchert-Arlt, an elementary school principal in Berlin and mother of three, said she felt afraid for the first time in her decades of living in Germany. She said her mother had asked her to stop wearing a Star of David, a family heirloom from her grandmother’s bat mitzvah, around her neck.

Friends have taken down their mezuzas, Ms. Melchert-Arlt said, and she no longer stifles a smile when a fellow Jew wonders if they are really welcome in Germany.

“We have all always felt the latent anti-Semitism here,” Ms. Melchert-Arlt said. “But what we have experienced in recent weeks and days, not only in Germany but across Europe, is a prevailing mood of outward anti-Jewish sentiment in the streets.”

Gaia Pianigiani contributed reporting from Rome, Katarina Johannsen from Berlin, and Aurelien Breeden from Paris.

A version of this article appears in print on August 2, 2014, on page A9 of the New York edition with the headline: Anger in Europe

Over the Gaza Fighting Reverberates as Anti-Semitism.

© 2014 The New York Times Company