

Back to the Future

An Interview with Robert S. Wistrich

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In a manner so even-tempered that someone out of earshot might imagine he is exchanging pleasantries about the weather, Professor Robert S. Wistrich dissects the “new anti-Semitism” and its speedy, infectious dissemination through technologies such as the Internet. But perhaps the 61-year-old prize-winning authority on the “longest hatred” (a phrase he coined, and the title of his 1992 book, which became a documentary film) really should be seen as a sort of weatherman, a barometer, whose extensive research on the Holocaust and radical Islam enables him to assess cultural, political and religious climates—then and now. Which leads one to want to pick his brain about the current and future state of the Jews, and of the Jewish state, caught in the crosswinds of an international cold front.

It's a blizzard that doesn't seem to be letting up. On the contrary, Muslim extremism, an increasingly anti-Zionist Europe and what Wistrich considers “irresponsible levels” of Jewish and Israeli self-flagellation are the stuff global tempests are made of—the kind that stir up, and threaten to blow in, nuclear missiles.

Wistrich, who holds the Neuberger chair for modern European and Jewish history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he heads the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism and edits its journal, *Anti-Semitism International*, was born and spent his early childhood in Kazakhstan (where his Polish-Jewish family fled in 1940, before immigrating to England). He attributes this storm to what he calls the “apocalyptic anti-Semitism” espoused by Iran and introduced into the Arab world, according to which “the annihilation of Israel is a necessary prologue to the redemption of all of humanity through Islam.”

This he sees as aided and abetted by the same type of “fellow travelers” who, “in effect, if not in intent,” gave impetus to the Nazis. Two documentary films he scripted and for which he acted as historical consultant deal with this very phenomenon: *Blaming the Jews* (2003) and *Obsession: Radical Islam and the West* (2006).

The author of dozens of books, among them *Hitler and the Holocaust* (first published by Random House in 2001, and subsequently translated into many languages), his latest work, *Laboratory for World Destruction: Germans and Jews in Central Europe* (University of Nebraska Press/Vidal Sassoon Center), will be released in May. He is also completing a book on the history of anti-Semitism since World War II, which will be published by Random House at the end of the year.

During this two-hour interview, which took place at the Hebrew University's Beit Meyersdorf late last month, Wistrich—who arrived on aliyah from the UK in 1982—grins at the pause taken

to ask him whether he has seen Sasha Baron Cohen's *Borat* movie.

"I have," he laughs. "And, as a native son of Kazakhstan, I felt deeply offended on behalf of my countrymen."

Is anti-Semitism really on the rise, or does mass communication give the impression that it is?

Mass communication enables anti-Semitic messages to spread like wildfire. This has the dangerous effect of making the myths and stereotypes that have always driven anti-Semitism both instantly accessible and more difficult to refute.

Doesn't this work both ways? Doesn't it enable instant refutation of anti-Semitic claims?

In principle, yes. But there is some truth to the adage that mud sticks.

Whenever I enter an Internet chat room relating to anti-Semitism, I am shocked to see the mind-boggling level of ignorance and prejudice, particularly about Israel. This is the new anti-Semitism. One of the things lacking in the effort to counter this is an organized campaign, via the Internet. We don't have people whose task it is to refute anti-Semitic claims 24 hours a day. Nor have we mobilized ordinary citizens who care passionately about this and who often have much better arguments at their fingertips than official spokesmen.

Do you really think that the rational refutation of irrational discourse makes a dent? Would it have mattered during the Third Reich had Jews argued their case better?

This is a complicated question. But one of the things that enabled the Nazis to succeed was the abundance of "fellow travelers."

Hitler's rise to power was not self-evident, particularly in such a highly civilized and educated society as Germany. Yet there were many circles that, in moments of crisis, were ready and willing to contemplate collaboration with the Nazi party once they became convinced either that they could use the Nazis to achieve certain ends, or that Nazism was indeed the salvation of Germany. These circles included intellectuals, members of the upper-middle class, industrialists, church leaders and academics. Anti-Semitism was particularly attractive in academia.

Why?

It's not very fashionable to say this now, but it had to do with competition. Jews were shaping the national and international culture of the time. It was a source of tremendous resentment that these "outsiders" were actually changing the societal agenda and modern culture as a whole. They were, as the anti-Semites said, "Judaizing" it.

But European Jews didn't see themselves as outsiders.

This is one of the most intriguing features of the anti-Semitism that became so rampant in

Europe before the Holocaust, and which was a main cause of it. What turned the anti-Semitism that had its profane banal explanations, such as economics and social rivalry, into something lethal was precisely the fact that Jews had “assimilated” so intensely. They were like super-Germans, super-French, super-Englishmen, etc. Because of this, the traditional anti-Semitism that was based on religion no longer had the same effect or resonance. Recourse was made, then, to an argument against which there is no defense, namely race. You cannot change your race; even conversion can't help you. A Jew remains a Jew under all circumstances, whether he is baptized, becomes totally assimilated or rejects any residual Jewish identity.

Ironically, the argument Jews always used in their apologies was that they were great contributors to their societies. They produced whole volumes about “the Jewish contribution to German culture.” But, of course, this further fed the very anti-Semitism they were trying to counter, because it completely confirmed the feeling that yes, indeed, they were contributing to society—they were totally Judaizing it.

The fact that they were willing to sacrifice their identity made things even worse. It confirmed in the minds of the anti-Semites that there was nothing to be valued in Judaism or Jewishness. After all, if these Jews are so eager to abandon it, what value can it have?

Freud spoke about the “narcissism of small differences”—about how, in ethnic conflicts, it is often the small differences that make antagonism greater. Indeed, the more that Jews became similar to their neighbors—the more their differences were dissolving—the more the problems that had been bubbling beneath the surface became acute.

The anti-Semites began to claim that the Jews were fusing with their societies in order to dominate their cultures and identities, and ultimately obtain political control. Communism was invoked as an example of this in the 1920s and '30s, because Jews were quite prominent in the communist leadership. And if the Jews were in the forefront of a universalist ideology that was perceived as sapping the whole basis of national identities, it was confirmation that the Jews were playing a diabolical role.

This is the thesis of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, according to which any force that saps the cohesion and established order is diabolical. This sapping force could be liberalism, freemasonry, the emancipation of women, doctrines like psychoanalysis or Marxism or even Darwinism - all of which were attributed to Jews. This is also what fired Hitler and the Nazis up on an ideological level. People often miss the point when they say that Nazism was anti-intellectual rubbish. To be sure, there was a gangster element in Nazism—the brute force—which was fundamental. But it could not have won over a people like the Germans, or gained so many fellow travelers, if that's all it had to sell. We shouldn't make that mistake again today.

Let's talk about today. If what you describe is true, wouldn't Europeans now fear Muslim domination? Why do Jews and the Jewish state still appear to constitute a threat?

Some people claim that Islamophobia is the greatest problem of European society today. But an objective look at the current situation, through statistics carefully compiled by European government agencies and police, shows that Islamophobia is much less acute than anti-Semitism.

Europeans are reluctant to accept and admit that, despite all the Holocaust education and commemoration that's taking place—and all the solemn declarations about having thoroughly learned the lessons of the past—anti-Semitism has returned in such strength. There's the beginning of an attempt to come to grips with this. In the UK, for instance, there was an inter-parliamentary committee that issued a report on this. I was one of the experts asked to testify. I met the members of the committee, non-Jewish parliamentarians who took their job seriously. They knew very little to begin with. One of them even said to me: “I don't recognize the country you're talking about.” By the time they ended, they were aghast at what they'd discovered.

After the Holocaust, there was a kind of taboo on public expressions of anti-Semitism, which seems to have expired. Can you provide a decade-by-decade account of the shift?

The first two decades of Israel's existence—1948-1967—were the honeymoon period, when Europe developed a new relationship with this young country. At that time, Israel was presenting itself not so much as a Jewish state, but as the pioneering, socialist land of the “new Jews.” Zionism was like a fresh start. This very much suited the Europeans, who refused to deal with the Holocaust, which was itself somewhat of a taboo subject at the time.

It was not acceptable to attack Jews publicly, and Israel was seen as a redemptive, and in many ways a convenient, solution all around. It was a sort of affirmative action, and there was willingness to look at it in friendly terms. Furthermore, the Arab world at the time did not have a very compelling narrative. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the idea of throwing the Israelis into the sea did not greatly resonate in the West.

After '67, the first shift began in the decay that set in during the 15 years between the Six Day War and the first Lebanon war—the period which carried the seeds of today's developments.

What caused it?

Here we have to bring America into the equation. Until 1967, the United States was not particularly friendly to Israel. In 1948, if it hadn't been for President Harry Truman, the US would not even have recognized Israel. This was a time when Congress didn't even want to admit Holocaust survivors into the US. In the 1950s, there was the practically anti-Israel policy of [president Dwight D.] Eisenhower and [secretary of state John Foster] Dulles. The first shift began to occur slowly with [president John F.] Kennedy. But it wasn't until the Six Day War that Israel became a strategic ally of the US—a valued partner that fit in very snugly with the entire global Cold War strategy, and polarization between America and Israel and the Soviet Union and the Arab world. From that point on, there was a slow build-up of a certain view—on the Left and in the liberal-Left mainstream—of Israel as an arm of America. Anti-Americanism began feeding anti-Zionism and vice versa. It is from that steady build-up over the past 40 years that we're reaping all the poison fruit now.

Where Europe is concerned, the big shift can be attributed to several factors, crucial among them the 1973 Yom Kippur War. For the first time, Europe's vulnerability to a blow to its oil supply was exposed, and the Arab world exacted a price: Israel. The condition for guaranteeing a good

relationship with the Arab world and a flow of oil was “delivering” Israel. This meant eventually “delivering” Israel altogether, through its dissolution. But the Arab leaders, more realistic after '67 and '73 about their chances for achieving that aim by military means, had to go down another track. This is where the Euro-Arab dialogue came in and contributed to Europe's steady alienation from Israel.

To say that Europe has adopted the Arab viewpoint would be an over-simplification. Europe has its own interests. Nevertheless, it's clear that, from the late '70s on, European officialdom adopted a political stance that only tolerates a greatly reduced Israel. This has been curbed somewhat by the rise of Islamic terrorism, as it has begun to occur to government and security agencies in Europe that it is a threat to them, as well.

Public opinion, however, is a different story. A potentially lethal process has been under way for at least three decades in which the intelligentsia have adopted a view that is in its effect, if not in its intent, anti-Jewish. (That it's anti-Israel goes without saying.)

In other words, the current politically correct and even dominant discourse says that Israel is the last colonial state, an apartheid state, a lackey of American imperialism in the best case, and the controller of US foreign policy in the worst. It is a diabolical force that is preventing peace in the Middle East and around the world.

This view of it as a diabolical conspiracy is reminiscent of the *Protocols*, is it not?

No self-respecting Western politician or intellectual would openly come out and say so. It's much more subtle than that. Terms like “neocon cabal” are used instead.

Speaking of “neocon cabals,” is anti-Semitism spreading in America, as well?

For historical reasons, anti-Semitism has been much less of a political force in the US than in Europe. America is exceptional; it's an immigrant society in which there's no established state religion. To put a more cynical gloss on it: [He laughs] It's a bigots' paradise. There are so many races to choose from, why focus on Jews? Seriously, though, America has been good for the Jews, but not always to the same extent that it is now. There was quite a lot of outspoken anti-Semitism in the 1930s and '40s. Things improved dramatically in the 1960s. That was the beginning of the Golden Age of American Jewry.

Was that connected to the Six Day War in some way?

Well, the Six Day War certainly improved the image of Jews vis-à-vis Israel. And herein lies a major difference between America and Europe: To put it simply, Americans love winners. And they were immensely impressed by what was probably the most spectacular military success of the 20th century. Americans didn't and don't have the same kind of hang-ups as Europeans do with that.

In terms of American opinion, the most dangerous point for Israel, and possibly for Jews in general in the US, is that at which they are perceived to be losers. Which is why Israel has to be

particularly careful about policies that not only go against its political and military interests, but about those that give the impression of weakness. This doesn't mean being insensitive to human rights, which are very important—no less in the US than anywhere else. But it requires being intelligent about how they are applied in a given situation—taking this neighborhood into account.

Regarding “this neighborhood,” is it more appropriate to examine Muslim or Arab anti-Semitism?

In a study I published with the American Jewish Committee, I called it Muslim anti-Semitism. One disconcerting phenomenon of the recent decade is that anti-Semitism among Muslims is no longer confined to Arabs. It's easy to forget that only about 20 percent of the Muslim world is Arab. You would never guess this from the way in which Arabs—from a non-Arab Muslim perspective—have hijacked Islam. There are good historical reasons for this: The prophet Muhammad was from the Arabian Peninsula, and Arabic is Islam's holy language. But the great demographic centers and powerhouses of the Muslim world are in Asia: in Indonesia—the largest Muslim country in the world; in Pakistan; in India alone, there's a minority of more than 100 million, which dwarfs most Arab countries; in Bangladesh; and so on.

Israel has never intelligently adjusted its policy to that fact. We are fixated on our little corner, which is one of the things that make it difficult to develop a more productive global strategy.

Now, in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, it would have been justified to focus all the attention on Arab nationalism, which was also anti-Semitic. Ba'athism, for example, is a fascistic, pan-Arab nationalism that was founded by Christian Arabs. It is what drove the anti-Zionism and the anti-Semitism in previous decades. [Egyptian president Gamal Abdel] Nasser, the great hero of the Arab masses, borrowed freely from European sources in the anti-Semitism that was state policy in Egypt. The Egyptians used former Nazis who had fled to the Middle East in their propaganda department. After '67, Arab nationalism looked bankrupt because of the crushing Arab defeat in the war. Also, it had lost its agenda, and in the '70s began to lose ground to Islam.

Islam is much more than a religion in the Western sense. We can't even begin to grasp what it means to ordinary Arabs in terms of their culture. It's an entire way of life. And it has the popular resonance that no alternative can have, which is what accounts for its popular force. And which is why the Iranian revolution of 1979 is such a crucial event.

Iran is not Arab, but it has become an inspiration to radical Muslims, including Arabs. The Ayatollah Khomeini introduced a form of anti-Semitism into the Arab world which I call “apocalyptic.” It is more visible than ever because of [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, but it was implicit in the Khomeini revolution from the beginning. They are actually waiting for the coming of the Islamic messiah—the 12th imam—and the annihilation of Israel is a necessary prologue to his return and to the redemption of all of humanity through Islam. And they believe—as the Marxists used to—that “history is on our side.”

Does criticism of Israel constitute anti-Zionism, and does anti-Zionism constitute anti-Semitism? If so, how do you explain the fact that Jews and Israelis are often among the

most vociferous critics?

There are those who claim that the merging of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is designed to silence legitimate criticism of Israel. This is disingenuous, if not deliberate obfuscation. I'm not aware of anybody who has been silenced. On the contrary, Jewish progressive voices have every platform imaginable available to them, and the prime-time media are only too willing to publicize every dissenting view.

On the substantive issue of when criticism of Israel becomes anti-Semitic, I think that there are good criteria. Every rational person understands the difference between criticism and defamation. If you talk about an individual in a defamatory way, you're going to the heart of his character, his essence. The same is true of countries. For decades, Israel has been discriminated against internationally in the most obvious and palpable way. It is a singling-out mechanism, which is even worse than applying a double standard. Double standards are automatically applied to anything Israel does. But it is only when Israel is deemed to violate human rights that there is a major international scandal.

There is a genocide going on even as we speak [in Darfur]; yet, this is something that cannot get onto the agenda. Instead, we have the diversion of the so-called ethnic cleansing or even genocide of the Palestinians being perpetrated, when in fact the only real abuse going on is that of the language used in making accusations. Yet these accusations develop their own *raison d'être*. It is enough simply to label Israel, you've made your case. You don't have to produce any real evidence. That's defamation.

Is there such a thing as Jewish anti-Semitism?

Yes, and it's perfectly possible to document. In the Middle Ages, for instance, the only way a Jew could exit his own society was through conversion. There's a long list of Jewish converts who played prominent, sometimes even starring, roles in accusations directed against the Jewish communities—saying they were in a conspiracy to undermine Christendom.

What about anti-Semitism among those who remain Jews?

This has usually occurred among ultra-assimilated Jews, intent on distancing themselves from the community they did not wish to be associated with. The strategy was to join the majority. That still exists today vis-à-vis Israel, because Israel is unpopular. When Israel becomes the source of anti-Semitism, the temptation of Jews who feel that pressure is to say, "If only I'm outwardly and openly anti-Israel, I will not be identified as a Jew." It's still the same psychological mechanism.

But Israelis, who are in any case identified as Jews and citizens of the Jewish state, also exhibit forms of it. How do you explain that?

One has to recognize that there are Israelis—and Jews elsewhere—who genuinely feel shame and disgust at phenomena occurring in Israel. As the stereotype goes, Jews are hypercritical people—you know [he laughs], two Jews, three opinions. This critical faculty is turned with

peculiar intensity and vehemence against co-religionists or co-nationals. In some cases, it's due to a genuine sense of indignation. Still, it often appears to have no rational limits—if these “critics” are neither aware of, nor interested in, the wider implications of their accusations. If you are part of a society whose very survival is threatened, and your opinions—as legitimate an expression of free speech as they may be—are feeding into hostility that could produce possibly genocidal results, I think a little responsibility is called for.

This doesn't necessarily mean self-censorship or being false to your beliefs. But it does mean the application of a minimum of sanity. After all, the critics of Israel are always one-sided. They always seem—despite their claims for caring about Palestinian rights and so on—to be totally, autistically, focused on Israel. It's as if the inhuman consequences of so much of what goes on in the Arab world is a matter of absolutely no concern to them.

Such as the treatment of women?

Yes, and the totally intolerant attitude toward homosexuals. Any number of phenomena that liberals and leftists champion are ignored when they are abused in the Arab world, because all attention must be focused obsessively on Israel.

Now, I'm as critical as the next person about what's going on in this country. But being critical doesn't mean you can embrace cheap and empty slogans, such as claims that Israel is an apartheid state. When such blatant falsehoods are uttered by intellectuals, one not only has to question their self-proclaimed status, but to wonder what it is they are trying to achieve. My conclusion is that this is an incurable pathology. I'm against heavy-handed responses to it. But people who hold such views should not be given excessive importance, which is what they crave. They have to be put in their proper place as a footnote in the long and sad saga of Jewish self-hatred.

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