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I listened attentively to the taped testimony given by Jewish university students to the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights on the subject of antisemitism. As a Jewish person, I sympathized with their feelings of vulnerability. Antisemitism exists. As a scholar who has devoted decades to research on the Muslim world and the religious minorities of Christian Europe<sup>1</sup>, I was disappointed by their limited knowledge of Jewish history. Indeed, as an educator, their lack of interest in understanding the real causes of the violence convulsing Israel and Palestine deeply disappointed me. Rather than attempt to untangle convoluted narratives or address misleading claims, my statement will discuss three relevant topics: first, the need to appreciate the spectrum of Jewish opinion with respect to Jewish nationalism; second, the importance of distinguishing between the perception of prejudice and the disquiet that may arise when ideologically-committed individuals confront inconvenient truths; and finally, to consider whether the structure of these hearings adequately addresses anti-Jewish hatred in its most virulent and dangerous forms, including from self-described supporters of Israel.

*Who speaks for the Jews?*

Why, in place of scholars with expertise on the history of antisemitism and legal experts knowledgeable about protections for minority groups under Canadian law, did the Committee limit the exploration of anti-Jewish prejudice to these particular individuals and organizations? Indeed, who speaks for the Jewish experience in Canada and elsewhere? Although spiritual leaders tend to take a transcendent view of religious community – as they do of doctrine and theology -- from Cochin to Caracas and the Atlas Mountain to Australia, world Jewish communities are culturally distinct; their rabbis disagree on points of Jewish law; and on the validity of Torah commentaries. Most Jews live outside of Israel and a third of the more than 7 million Jews in the U.S.A. have no affiliation with a specific denomination.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, too, Jewish relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors have varied widely.<sup>3</sup> Over the past millennium, while most of the ancient Jewish communities of the Muslim Middle East survived in place until the mid-twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> the Jews of Western Christendom were chased from their homes: pogroms, forced conversion, and mass expulsions drove the majority of European Jews eastward toward Polish lands and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Jerusalem continued to be a symbolic pole in Jewish theology. It is, however, critically important to distinguish a spiritual yearning for "Zion" from political Zionism, a program advanced by modern, secular Jewish intellectuals.<sup>6</sup> After the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Western Jews sought to forge a new relationship with majority Christian societies. Disappointed by the pace of Jewish emancipation<sup>7</sup> a journalist, Theodor Herzl, drafted

a manifesto in favor of a Jewish-only state that he hoped to realize by means of a very European (actually colonial) plan of resettlement.

Until the Holocaust, Jewish nationalism and the Zionist project did not win over European Jews. Although some Russian Jews settled in Ottoman Palestine in the late nineteenth century,<sup>8</sup> most preferred to immigrate toward the Americas or Western Europe. Today, not only do Ultra-Orthodox sects reject the Israeli state on religious grounds,<sup>9</sup> but most Jews reside in multi-cultural societies. The ascendancy of Jewish supremacist parties and movements, with their avowed goal to establish a “Greater Israel”—in the words of the Likud platform, “from the river to the sea” --<sup>10</sup> has transformed Israeli politics. It has further divided Jewish communities and alienated many Zionists from Israel’s current political trajectory.<sup>11</sup>

### *Are Pro-Palestinian Protests Antisemitic or Disconcerting Reminders of Troubling Truths?*

Jews in Canada, many of whom have relatives in Israel (as do I), were shaken by the news that 100s of civilians in Israel were killed or taken hostage by Palestinian militants on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023. However, when one of the world’s most powerful militaries<sup>12</sup> began to rain 2,000 pound bombs over entire city blocks in the densely populated, sealed enclave of Gaza, resulting in 1000s of civilian deaths and the wholesale destruction of life-sustaining infrastructure in retaliation,<sup>13</sup> public sympathy around the world shifted. Despite rare and regrettable instances of antisemitic speech, the chants of anti-war protestors (from “the river to the sea”) and their terminology (*intifada* = Arabic for shaking off) may imperfectly express grief and outrage at a political order that has dispossessed another people but do not contain “genocidal” intent against Jews nor do they in anyway jeopardize their safety.<sup>14</sup> What these sustained protests by students of many religions do provoke is a deep disquietude for those whose cherished myths encounter inconvenient facts,<sup>15</sup> some of which I summarize below:

- The British betrayal of their WWI Arab allies who were promised self-determination but instead found themselves subject to a colonial League of Nations’ mandate in 1922.<sup>16</sup>
- The anti-migration policies of Western states that shut their doors to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution and later to Holocaust survivors.<sup>17</sup>
- The United Nations’ unequal division of Palestine between Jews and Arabs in 1947 without plans for a peaceful transition. In the ensuing war, Jewish militias prevailed and expelled 800,000 Palestinian civilians from their homes.<sup>18</sup>
- Cold War rivalries that added fuel to regional conflicts, including the United States transfer of billions of dollars in weaponry to Israel, the only state in the region with a nuclear arsenal.
- Israeli governments’ serial violations of international law: the refusal to allow the return of war refugees in 1949 and the confiscation of Palestinian land and property, policies that continued after 1967 and accelerated after the 1993-95 Oslo accords.<sup>19</sup>
- Israel’s use of overwhelming force and collective punishment to suppress both peaceful and armed resistance by a people under occupation. A system of apartheid -- blockades, barriers, bypass roads and checkpoints—that strangles Palestinian economic development and divides communities.<sup>20</sup>

*Does Canada need to redefine antisemitism to combat prejudice?*

Both the timing of these hearings, as the massive suffering and starvation caused by Israel's campaign in Gaza, determined by the International Court of Justice to constitute "plausible genocide," only intensifies and their structure, eerily reminiscent of those held in the U.S. House of Representatives last December, suggest that their goals may not be limited to documenting instances of antisemitism on campuses.<sup>21</sup> Republicans on the House Committee on Education, who subjected the heads of leading universities to a veritable inquisition plotted a course toward HR 6090, the "Antisemitism Awareness Act of 2023." The bill, that passed on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, is modeled on the ad hoc or working definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). In comparison with the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism,<sup>22</sup> the IHRA formulation lacks scholarly substance and legal rigor. Its chief virtue is that it blurs the distinction between antisemitism, as prejudicial acts toward Jews, and criticism of the actions of a powerful state, which majority population are Jews.

The reason why the IHRA definition has gained so much traction owes to a new political alignment, an alliance between Jewish pro-Israeli advocacy and far-right groups who espouse a "new-philosemitism."<sup>23</sup> These extremists admire Israeli militarism; and they view Israel as an outpost of Western civilization against Islam. Pro-Israel positioning provides cover for their xenophobia and violent agendas. In the U.S., the new philosemitism maps a widening cultural divide. In contrast to the 1000 Black American pastors who issued a plea for a ceasefire in Gaza in January, Republicans who promote bans on African American Studies, oppose reproductive and LGBTQ + rights offer Israel unlimited military support regardless of the human costs.<sup>24</sup>

Not a few of the supporters of HR 6090 traffic in classic antisemitism. They include Evangelicals like Pastor John Hagee who believes that the fulfillment of Christianity's promise entails the end of Judaism and the destruction of Jews<sup>25</sup> and the QAnon influenced congresswoman, Marjorie Taylor Greene, who insisted Jewish conspiracies extend into space.<sup>26</sup> Former President Trump, defended white supremacist marchers who chanted "Jews will not replace us" in Virginia in 2017 as "very fine people." A year later, it was the same "replacement theory" – the notion that Jews plot to destroy White Christian America through migration – that motivated a gunman to kill Jewish worshipers in a Pittsburgh synagogue.<sup>27</sup>

There are Jewish politicians who understand the danger this type of transactional approach to promote parochial interests in favor of Israel poses for a democracy.<sup>28</sup> Representative Gerald Nadler, a longtime supporter of Israel, vetoed HR 6090, because it "threatens to chill constitutionally protected speech," characterizing it as "a cynical attempt to exploit for political gain the deep divisions currently on display at college campuses."<sup>29</sup>

One can only hope that despite the limited perspectives and content offered by these panels on this important subject, Canadians will understand that invoking antisemitism to shield a state's war crimes from public scrutiny does not protect Jews but it does endanger our fundamental rights.

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- <sup>1</sup> Ariel Salzman *The Exclusionary West: Medieval Minorities and the Making of Modern Europe* forthcoming
- <sup>2</sup> "Jewish Americans in 2020: [//www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/)
- <sup>3</sup> Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (2008).
- <sup>4</sup> Orit Baskin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (2012)
- <sup>5</sup> Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550–1750* (1985); Esther Benbassa, Aron Rodrigue *Sephardi Jewry A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries* (2000).
- <sup>6</sup> Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea A Historical Analysis and Reader* (1997)
- <sup>7</sup> Pierre Birnbaum, Ira Katznelson, eds. *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship* (2016)
- <sup>8</sup> Michelle Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (2010)
- <sup>9</sup> Yakov M. Rabkin, *A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism* 2006
- <sup>10</sup> 1077 Likud Party Platform: "The right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel is eternal and indisputable... therefore, Judea and Samaria will not be handed to any foreign administration; between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty."
- <sup>11</sup> [https://www.btselem.org/press\\_releases/20240520\\_the\\_era\\_of\\_impunity\\_for\\_israeli\\_decision\\_makers\\_is\\_over](https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20240520_the_era_of_impunity_for_israeli_decision_makers_is_over)
- <sup>12</sup> Staff, "Israel ranks among 10 most powerful countries in annual list; 4th strongest military." 2 January 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-among-10-most-powerful-countries-in-the-world-in-annual-list/>
- <sup>13</sup> "Daily death rate in Gaza higher than any other major 21st Century conflict – Oxfam." January 11, 2024 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/daily-death-rate-gaza-higher-any-other-major-21st-century-conflict-oxfam>
- <sup>14</sup> "For Some Jews, the Campus Wars Over Gaza Suck. But They Are Not a Violent, Antisemitic Nightmare." *Haaretz* Podcast (May 1, 2024).
- <sup>15</sup> Generally: Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents* (2020); Rashid Khalidi, *Hundred Years' War on Palestine* (2021).
- <sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance* (2020).
- <sup>17</sup> Barry Trachtenberg, *The United States and the Nazi Holocaust Race, Refuge, and Remembrance* (2018) <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2018/11/07/prime-minister-delivers-apology-regarding-fate-passengers-ms-st-louis>
- <sup>18</sup> Bashir Bashir, Amos Goldberg *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History* (2018). Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1989).
- <sup>19</sup> Frank D. Lewis, "Compensation and the abandoned property of the 1948 Palestinian refugees: Assessment and implications." *Explorations in Economic History* 44(2007): 523-537; Adam Raz, *Loot: How Israel Stole Palestinian Property* (English translation, forthcoming 2024).
- <sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch. "A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution (April 27, 2021) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>
- <sup>21</sup> See the short B'nai B'rith video ("From the River to the Sea") embedded in their main web page, <https://www.bnaibrith.ca>.
- <sup>22</sup> Compare, <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org>. Kenneth Stern, "I drafted the definition of antisemitism. Right-wing Jews are weaponizing it." <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect>; <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/02/15/opinion/kenneth-stern-antisemitism-ihra-free-speech/>
- <sup>23</sup> Hannah Rose, "The New Philosemitism: Exploring a Changing Relationship Between Jews and the Far-Right." *International Centre for the Study of Radicalization*, King's College London (2020).
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/30/us-evangelical-christians-israel-hamas-war>
- <sup>25</sup> Henry Carnell, Sam van Pykeren, "He Claimed God Sent Hitler to Create Israel. Now He's Speaking at the Pro-Israel Rally: What?" (November 14, 2023) <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/11/john-hagee-hitler-israel-rally-christian-zionist/>
- <sup>26</sup> Jonathan Chait, "Marjorie Taylor Greene Blamed Wildfires on Secret Jewish Space Laser." 28 January 2021

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<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/marjorie-ta...>

<sup>27</sup> "HIAS Statement on Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting, Five Years Later. <https://hias.org/statements/pittsburgh-attack-five-years/>

<sup>28</sup> E.J. Dickson, "Musk Endorsement Has a Top ADL Advisor Ready to Quit. *Rolling Stone* (November 26, 2023) <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/anti-defamation-league-elon-musk-jonathan-greenblatt-antisemitism-critics-interviews-1234897065/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://nadler.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=395152>