

Arab and Muslim Anti-Semitism in Sweden

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Anti-Semitism is perceived as a minor problem in Sweden, restricted to marginal neo-Nazi and other extreme-Right groups. Anti-Jewish ferment among parts of the country's Arab and Muslim population is largely denied and ignored. Nevertheless, the phenomenon exists and manifests itself among some Arab and Muslim pupils in suburban schools, on Muslim websites in Swedish, and in attacks on Jews and their institutions. This anti-Semitism has its roots in the Middle East, where it is widespread in the countries of origin of many Arab and Muslim immigrants in Sweden and reaches them through various channels such as satellite television and the Internet. The exclusion of many Arabs and Muslims from Swedish society fosters the spread of anti-Semitism in the segregated suburbs of the major cities. The situation calls for seriously addressing these groups' problem of alienation.

In the wake of the breakdown of the Oslo process and the renewed intifada, a wave of anti-Semitic violence has swept over Europe. Most attention has been paid to the arsons and other violent attacks in France and other countries such as Germany and Belgium. But Swedish Jewry, too, has felt this phenomenon.

Swedish Jewry seems, however, to have been the only segment of society not just to be affected by the violence, but also to notice it. In the country at large, the tendency of growing Arab and Muslim anti-Semitism has been almost completely ignored, and to this day most Swedes are unaware of the anti-Jewish sentiments among immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries and their descendants. Judging even by Swedish public discourse over the past decades, anti-Semitism no longer belongs exclusively to neo-Nazis on the extreme Right. Yet Swedes have been socialized into treating anti-Semitism as a branch of racism among ultranationalist groups, and anti-Semitism among other sectors - such as the extreme Left, Arabs, and Muslims - is mostly unknown.¹

Moreover, in some cases Arab and Muslim anti-Semitism has been denied. For instance, the journalist and bestselling author Jan Guillou has used his column in Sweden's largest newspaper, the Social Democratic *Aftonbladet*, to argue that while anti-Semitism used to be a problem in Swedish society, any talk of it in today's Sweden is only a strategy to build sympathy for Israel and an indirect defense of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.²

Arab and Muslim Anti-Semitism

Arab and Muslim anti-Semitism has nothing to do with dislike of Semitic peoples in general; by definition, anti-Semitism can only be directed at Jews. Bernard Lewis notes that a common

defense of Arab anti-Semites is that they cannot be anti-Semites because they themselves are Semites. As he points out, this would mean that a copy of *Mein Kampf* published in German in Berlin or in Spanish in Buenos Aires would be anti-Semitic, but an Arabic version of the same book published in Cairo would not be since Arabic and Hebrew are related languages.³

Anti-Semitism is the hatred or dislike of Jews qua Jews, nothing more and nothing less. The term was coined in the 1870s by Wilhelm Marr, partly to dress his anti-Jewish sentiment in a new, modern, ostensibly scientific vocabulary and partly to distance it from Christian anti-Judaism.⁴ It is hard to give an all-encompassing definition of anti-Semitism beyond the fact that it always involves some elements of negative attitudes or notions about Jews. Helen Fein defines it as a lasting, latent structure of beliefs about Jews as a collective. On the individual level, it manifests itself as sentiments; on the cultural level, as myths, ideology, and popular traditions; and on the practical level as social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against Jews, and collective or even governmental violence against them aiming to expel or even kill them for being Jews.⁵

Similarly, anti-Semitism in the Arab and Muslim world has an Islamic and a secular-nationalist dimension.⁶ The latter is more or less identical with the secular forms of anti-Semitism that developed in nineteenth-century Europe. With the growth of European influence in the Middle East, the Arabs imported not only cheap goods and political ideas but also anti-Semitism in this modern, racist form. The first to embrace it were often the local Christian communities, which had closer ties with European Christians than their Muslim neighbors. With the rise of Arab nationalism, an ideology that Christian Arab intellectuals were often among the first to adopt, the Jews were increasingly seen as an alien body in the Arab world, distinct from the Arab Muslims and Christians.⁷

Religious Muslim anti-Semitism differs from Christian anti-Semitism. Traditionally, Islam does not have the same kind of problematic relationship to Judaism as Christianity has, since Jews in the Muslim tradition were perceived as a vanquished people that did not pose any threat to Islam. So long as Jews recognized Muslims' superior status and paid the *jizyah*, the special tax on non-Muslims, they were usually left alone. Some verses in the Koran and examples from the religious tradition show hostility toward Jews, but compared to their brethren in the Christian world, Jews in Muslim countries were usually treated relatively well and only rarely subjected to outright persecution.⁸

This situation changed in the last century. Unlike in Europe, where the Holocaust made publicly endorsing anti-Semitism taboo, Jewhatred has always been acceptable in the modern Arab and Muslim world. Owing both to political developments and the growth of radical Islam, more recently it has only intensified. The establishment of the state of Israel is doubly problematic in this regard, since it not only is seen as a colonial project of an alien, non-Arab people but also defies the Muslim idea of *dar al-Islam*, the Muslim world where infidels are not allowed to rule believers.⁹ The anti-Semitic elements in the religious tradition that were largely ignored or played only a minor part in Muslim discourse are now salient, and in today's Arab and Muslim world anti-Semitism is widespread.¹⁰ It is propagated both by governments and religious authorities, spread via state-controlled media, the Internet, mosques, schools, and universities.¹¹

This anti-Semitism has also emerged among Arabs and Muslims in Europe. In today's globalized world, the same satellite television channels and websites can be viewed in Europe as in Egypt or Malaysia. Moreover, the segregation of immigrant neighborhoods contributes to a situation where Arabs and Muslims in Europe remain part of the cultural discourse of their

countries of origin. Well known in Paris, London, and other metropolitan areas for years, this phenomenon also exists in the suburbs of Sweden's three largest cities: Stockholm - population one million; Göteborg, 500,000; and Malmö, 250,000.

Suburban Schools

In Swedish schools, religious studies is a mandatory subject. Pupils are taught not only Christianity but also other religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The purpose of these classes is not, as when Protestant Christianity was the only religion in the curriculum, to spread a certain creed but to provide a deeper understanding of other cultures and worldviews and foster tolerance. Some suburban schools, however, have a majority of Arab and Muslim pupils, and they object to the teaching of one specific religion - Judaism. Some of them decline to participate in the classes on this subject, some actively sabotage them, and others do not show up at all. Such pupils may refuse to do their homework or take tests on Judaism, or go on field trips to local synagogues.¹²

Sometimes pupils react very strongly when Islam is described as a religion that grew out of a tradition largely inspired by Judaism, rejecting the notion that there could be any connection between the two religions. As a consequence, these pupils' knowledge of Judaism is usually very limited and their prejudices are rife. They may "learn" about Judaism only in the mosques, where apparently they are mostly told that Jews are infidels who will burn in hell.¹³

Another subject that sometimes causes trouble in these schools is the Holocaust. The Arab and Muslim pupils often express either some form of Holocaust denial, or appreciation for the genocide of European Jewry. Sometimes they profess both opinions simultaneously. While saying on the one hand that the Holocaust is a lie, or at least has been largely exaggerated by Jews to extort reparations or build sympathy for Israeli policies, they also aver that it was a pity that Hitler did not kill more Jews.

One Holocaust survivor, who gives lectures at schools all over the country about his experiences during the Shoah, tells of Arab and Muslim pupils who stay away from his talks, sometimes at their parents' request. Pupils, he says, who do attend rarely express hostility, but those who do are exclusively "of Middle Eastern origin." After his lectures he asks for the listeners' evaluations, and once a pupil from an Iraqi family wrote:

That, which happened in the Second World War I think it was a good thing of Hitler to treat the Jews that way because I hate Jews. After the war they tried to get a country because they didn't have a country and so they took a part of Palestine and they created little Israel because Hitler threw them out of every country and that thing today the lecture by the survivor was only crap. The film was bad and I think what Hitler did to the Jews served them right and I don't care what you the survivor talked about and I wish that the Palestinian people kill all the Jews. Jews are the most disgusting people in the world and the biggest cowards and because of what happened today I wasn't going to come to school because an ugly Jew comes to school.¹⁴

Other lecturers and teachers have similar experiences, with pupils expressing their hatred of Jews in the same kind of terms. They rarely make any distinction among Jews, Israelis, or Zionists, and have very clear opinions about Jewish behavior or characteristics despite having had little or no interaction with Jews.

Teachers tend to point to the home environment as explaining these pupils' attitudes. In the segregated suburbs, immigrants live isolated from Swedish society, culture, and values while staying in touch with the discourse of their countries of origin. Hence, Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian pupils tend to be more anti-Semitic than those from Bosnia or Turkey, for example.¹⁵

The Internet

Like others of the ilk, Arab and Muslim anti-Semites long since discovered the advantages of the Internet. There are a number of Muslim anti-Semitic websites in Swedish, the best known of which is that of Radio Islam. Already as a radio station in the 1980s, it broadcast Nazi-like anti-Semitism.¹⁶ The content could have been taken from *Der Stürmer* or *Mein Kampf*, with the Jews accused of being sexually perverted, brazen, and greedy, committing ritual murders, having great influence over the media, and organizing a world conspiracy aimed at enslaving all other peoples.¹⁷

Ahmed Rami, the man behind Radio Islam, was convicted of hate crimes because of the anti-Semitic content of his broadcasts, in 1989 and again in a court of appeals. Nevertheless, influential journalists and politicians supported him and even denied or exculpated his anti-Semitism.¹⁸ Jan Bergman, professor of theology at Uppsala University, testified in Rami's defense and claimed, among other things, that for Jews it was indeed a religious duty to kill Gentiles.¹⁹

Although Radio Islam has Sweden's most aggressively and systematically anti-Semitic Muslim website, it is not the only one. Other sites run by Swedish Muslims on themes such as Islam, Arab and Muslim culture, and Middle Eastern politics disseminate anti-Semitism. While they do so less relentlessly than Radio Islam, the content of their anti-Semitism is little different.²⁰

The idea that Jews all behave in a certain way and have specific character traits is common on these sites. Jews are portrayed as cruel and bloodthirsty, greedy and cheap, power-hungry and arrogant, cowardly and duplicitous. They are also regularly accused of sexual perversion. On one site, which describes "Jewish capital" as controlling pedophilia and child pornography, Jews are charged with sexual misconduct and racism toward Gentiles:

If a Jew attacks a woman's honor, it doesn't matter. This is not his fault, since a non-Jewish woman is no more than an animal and with animals there is no need for a marriage contract. Between Jews he is not allowed to act that way. The Jews are allowed to rape non-Jewish women....No Jewish woman may complain if her husband commits adultery with a non-Jewish woman.²¹

Both biblical and modern instances are adduced, from distorted accounts of King David to propaganda stories about the Israel Defense Forces. For example, Joseph becoming viceroy of Egypt is cited as an example of Jews' striving for political and economic control in their countries of residence, with Joseph being compared to Mussolini.²²

These sites present Judaism as a perverted or evil religion. An article called "The Truth behind Muslim-Jewish Animosity" calls on Muslims to hate Jews: "We hate them for the sake of our Lord, we hate them for Allah's sake because they slandered Allah and slandered and killed His

Prophets." Later, it describes the Talmud as teaching that Gentiles are pigs, their souls worth less in God's eyes than those of animals, and that Jews must fight Muslims. "The Jews" are also accused of "criminal behavior against the House of Allah," that is, the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, by trying to destroy it and dig tunnels to undermine it.²³

A classic anti-Semitic theme found on some Swedish Muslim websites is that of a Jewish world conspiracy. It is blamed for virtually all problems, from poverty, drug trade, and prostitution to every present day war and the 11 September attack. From this viewpoint, the fact that a public person is Jewish is proof of his or her membership in the conspiracy.

Several Swedish institutions, such as Uppsala University, the Swedish Bar Association, and Amnesty International, are said to be in the conspiracy's hands. Some of these websites, including Islamiskaforum and Radio Islam, have also published the "Jew List." Originating in Nazi circles, it contains the names of Swedes who are accused of belonging to the Swedish branch of the Jewish conspiracy. The editor of a large Swedish newspaper is called a "propaganda producer, Jewish whore who chose to work her way up through the Social Democratic Party." A former governor is described as a "typical thief, a Jew." A cabinet minister is dubbed a "Jewish midget...Sweden's Jewish trade minister." A well-known journalist is referred to as a "Jewish charlatan, a propagandist with a Polish-Jewish background."²⁴ The list contains hundreds more names.

Anti-Semitic Attacks

It is impossible to fully assess how common anti-Semitic sentiments are among Arabs and Muslims in Sweden. One indication may be the number of anti-Semitic attacks and other crimes with anti-Semitic motives that occur in the country. Because of the relatively large number of such acts that go unreported and the method of registration used by the police, the frequency of these events cannot be ascertained.²⁵ It is clear, however, that they increased sharply in 2000 after the breakdown of the Oslo process and the renewal of the intifada.

The most common form of anti-Semitic crime is harassment in the street by Arab and Muslim youths who identify passersby as Jewish. Such verbal or physical attacks are especially common during Jewish holidays, when more Jews than usual are visible close to synagogues and community centers. For instance, three men identified as Arabs walked by the Great Synagogue in Stockholm on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, 2002, and shouted, "I'll kill you, Zionists!" A young man was attacked on his way home from synagogue in Malmö by a group of Arab youths on Yom Kippur, 2004. In a slightly different incident in 2002, a Muslim taxi driver refused to drive two elderly women to the synagogue in Stockholm and forced them out of his car when he identified them as Jewish.²⁶

The largest anti-Semitic incident over the past five years took place in Stockholm on 18 April 2002, when a rally against anti-Semitism and Islamophobia organized by the Liberal Youth Movement was stormed. Some sixty individuals, mostly of Middle Eastern background, physically attacked participants, destroyed signs, and shouted epithets like "Jewish swine!" and "Allahu Akbar!" Many of those in the rally, including some Holocaust survivors, suffered injury and shock before the police intervened after fifteen to twenty minutes. Similar attacks have taken place in Malmö and Göteborg.²⁷

What Can Be Done?

The Arab and Muslim communities in Sweden are large and heterogeneous. Not all their members are anti-Semites, and only a small handful attack Jews. Still, the anti-Semitism is real and Jews in Sweden feel threatened, few daring to wear a kippa or Magen David pendant in public.

To deal with the situation, the Swedish government and society at large must first cease their denial and acknowledge that it exists. Secondly, there must be a will to tackle it. Among those who acknowledge this anti-Semitism, not all perceive it as a problem, or at least not as one that can be confronted. Jan Samuelsson, professor of the history of religions, says Arab and Muslim anti-Semitism in Sweden is "understandable, reasonable, and justified."²⁸ Although he is an exception, many others are willing to exculpate the phenomenon as regrettable but inevitable as long as Israel occupies Palestinian territory.

Such tolerance for intolerance is a recipe for catastrophe and in the end may have grave consequences not only for Swedish Jewry. To cease making excuses for the phenomenon and realize that it is part of a global trend is the first step in battling it. This must, however, be part of a broader strategy of counteracting segregation in the suburbs of Sweden's larger cities. Socially, culturally, and economically integrating the Arab and Muslim immigrants is something from which everyone, not only the Jews, would benefit.

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Notes

1. There are only a few works dealing with anti-Semitism on the Swedish Left. See, e.g., Per Ahlmark, *Vänstern och tyranniet - Det galna kvartsseklet* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1994) (Swedish); Henrik Bachner, *Återkomsten - Antisemitism i Sverige efter 1945* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1999) (Swedish).
2. Jan Guillou, "Okupationen är omöjlig att försvara," *Aftonbladet*, 15 April 2002, p. 10 (Swedish). Guillou is not the only *Aftonbladet* columnist to hold this view. See, e.g., Johanne Hildebrandt, "Trötta generaliseringar spär bara på misstron," *Aftonbladet*, 26 October 2003, p. 56 (Swedish); Mats K. G. Johansson, "Hela arabvärlden demoniseras," *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 February 2004, p. 56 (Swedish).
3. Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1986), p. 16.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 49. See also Moshe Zimmermann, *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Antisemitism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
5. Helen Fein, "Dimensions of Antisemitism: Attitudes, Collective Accusations, and Actions," in Helen Fein, ed., *The Persisting Question: Sociological Perspectives and Social Contexts of Modern Antisemitism*, Current Research on Antisemitism, Vol. 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987).
6. Raphael Israeli, "Anti-Jewish Attitudes in the Arabic Media, 1975-1981," in Robert S. Wistrich, ed., *From Anti-Zionism to Anti-Semitism in the Contemporary World* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and

London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 102.

7. Robert S. Wistrich, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), p. 206.

8. Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, p. 121; Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, p. 196.

9. Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, p. 224.

10. Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, p. 196.

11. See, e.g., Arnon Groiss, *The West, Christians and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks* (New York and Jerusalem: Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, 2003); Daniel J. Wakin, "Anti-Semitic 'Elders of Zion' Gets New Life on Egypt TV," *New York Times*, 26 October 2002; Fouad Ajami, "What the Muslim World Is Watching," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 November 2001.

12. Mikael Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet - Antisemitism bland araber och muslimer i Sverige," Svenska Kommittén Mot Antisemitism, Stockholm, 2003, p. 22 (Swedish).

13. Jackie Jakubowski, "'Judarna kommer att brinna i helvetet,' förklarar en elev. Det fick han lära sig i en Koran-skola," *Judisk Krönika*, No. 2, 2001 (Swedish).

14. The letter is quoted in Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet," p. 24. The peculiarities in the grammar and orthography reflect the Swedish original. The translation from Swedish is this author's.

15. Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet," p. 26.

16. Ahlmark, *Vänstern och tyranniet*, p. 85.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

18. See, e.g., Dennis Zachrisson, *FiB-Kulturfront*, No. 16, 1988 (Swedish); Claes-Adam Wachtmeister, *Expressen*, 26 September 1990 (Swedish); Sven öste, *Dagens Nyheter*, 23 September 1990 (Swedish).

19. Ahlmark, *Vänstern och tyranniet*, p. 249.

20. Many of these websites have changed their addresses after their anti-Semitic content was analyzed in Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet."

21. See www.islamiskaforum.com. The translation from Swedish is this author's.

22. "Abûl-A'î al-Mawdûdî kritiserar Allåhs profeter," at www.darulhadith.com (Swedish).

23. "The Truth behind Muslim-Jewish Animosity," www.islamiskaforum.com (Swedish). The translation from Swedish is this author's.

24. See, e.g., www.islamiskaforum.com.

25. See the annual report by the Secret Police (SÄPO), "Brottslighet kopplad till rikets säkerhet 2002," Stockholm, 2003, pp. 30, 82 (Swedish).

26. For more examples, see Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet," p. 36.

27. See, e.g., Per Svensson, "Det brinner på Möllvångstorget," *Judisk Krönika*, No. 2, 2001, p. 30 (Swedish); Eva Hermelius, "Farligt med kippa på stan," *ibid.*, p. 35 (Swedish).

28. Jan Samuelsson, "Muslimers hat mot judar är befogat," *Dagens Nyheter*, 25 October 2003 (Swedish).

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