

MERIA

HOW THE UK ARRIVED AT THE PRESENT SITUATION REGARDING ISRAEL AND MIDDLE EAST ISSUES

By Douglas Murray*

This article discusses the anti-Israel campaign in the UK and its attempt to delegitimize and “demonize” Israel, pointing to radical Islamist trends in British society and political life as a central factor.

A few days in March 2010 gave a good flavor of the present standing of Israel in the United Kingdom. On March 23, then British Foreign Secretary David Miliband announced to the House of Commons that the government was expelling an Israeli diplomat. The expulsion, thought to be of the London Mossad chief, came after forged British passports were used to kill a Hamas terrorist in Dubai (an incident which Israel denies any involvement in).

The following Monday, March 29, the Jerusalem String Quartet was due to play at the Wigmore Hall, one of London’s most prestigious music venues. The concert, to be broadcast live on the BBC, was repeatedly disrupted by anti-Israel protestors accusing the players of being representatives of the Israeli government. The broadcast was cancelled. On this occasion, the anti string-quartet protestors, from a branch of the “Palestine Solidarity Campaign,” were Jewish-led.

These two examples are cited, because they are emblematic. If one nation wanted a range of responses to delegitimize and demonize another state, it would be hard to imagine a better, or wider, range of activities. Not being allowed to have full diplomatic representation in a city that allows the Iranian government and numerous other hostile regimes to do so is one thing. A situation in which even the performance of a Mozart string quartet by nationals of the same country becomes impossible (the Jerusalem quartet have been barracked like this in Britain before) would appear to demonstrate that the exceptional

demonizing of Israel in public life is now not occasional but, rather, all-encompassing.

How did the UK arrive at this state of affairs? The number of reasons is too large to list, let alone describe, in this space. They can, however, be broadly categorized under two headings. First, there are those reasons that can be explained by circumstances. Second, and certainly equally significant, there are those reasons that have their basis not in verifiable evidence but rather in conspiracy theory and anti-reason ranging from paranoia to the misguided expression of what will be described here as “the new virtue.”

The reason that used to be given for any hostility toward Israel in Britain was that a portion of the British population remained hostile to the state because of the actions of the Irgun, Haganah, and other such groups during the period of the mandate. Today, very few British people are familiar with this aspect of Israeli history. It is a memory that has mostly receded with the passing of those involved.

The reason Britain has recently become a hub of anti-Israeli sentiment is clear. It is because Britain has over recent decades become a hub, some would argue *the* hub, of Islamist extremism worldwide. This has come about because since the World War II, Britain has seen an unparalleled mass immigration of Muslims. Although by far the majority of these Muslims are peaceable, with such large numbers of Muslims a certain percentage among them--constituting a large number of people--are inevitably not. From a negligible

number in the 1940s, in 2010 the UK (with a population of around 60 million) now has over two million Muslims. This counts as the fastest population shift in British history. Most of these Muslim immigrants have arrived from the Indian sub-continent, especially Pakistan.

Two generations ago, these immigrants were encouraged to integrate and join British society, but that has changed over the last two decades. One of the effects of the riots against Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, in 1989 was the formation of the first purportedly grass-roots British Muslim organizations as well as the emergence of what would become a growing business: that of self-appointed Muslim spokesmen (always men).

These groups tended to bring a Pakistani political flavor--particularly that associated with Jama'at i-Islami--into the UK for the first time. Their concerns, however, gradually focused on other issues by which they saw they could gain traction, first among British Muslims, and second among the wider population. In the wake of September 11, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) became one of the leading Muslim organizations in the UK. This organization, the most prominent organized wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in the UK, among other things helped to refocus the gaze of the Muslim and wider communities onto the Israel/Palestinian issue. The "Stop the War Coalition" set up after September 11 was a composite of the far-left Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the MAB. Their banners at protests against British involvement in the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were covered on one side with denunciations of British troop involvement and on the other a call for "Free Palestine."

Yet it is not simply because an undeniably large and swift influx of Muslims has arrived in Britain that this problem has come about. It is also because Britain has provided them with perhaps the very weakest societal response of all the countries into which mass Muslim migration has occurred. The result of having a system that people can take advantage of is

that people indeed take advantage of it. Certain Muslims in particular have.

Across British society unadulterated "free-speech" arguments have been perverted to cover for routine hate-speech and open incitement. Terrorist groups like Hamas not only have funding channels working through the UK, but those funding channels have taxpayer-gifted charitable status. In addition, government (taxpayer) money is given to radical groups in a misguided effort to make them "moderate."

On campuses, especially those in London, Manchester and other areas with large Muslim student populations, attacks on Israel's right to exist have passed from the common-room to the teaching-room and back out again. In April 2010, the deputy ambassador of Israel to the UK was physically attacked on campus at the University of Manchester. On occasion at some campuses, including some in London, it has become impossible for Israeli or pro-Israeli speakers to appear.

As a result of a very deliberate campaign from the start of the "War on Terror," at places of learning and in society at large, it has become lodged in the public mind that an issue at best tangential to the issues at hand is not just a part of the picture but the biggest part of the picture, and eventually, the whole picture. This is why any mention of political instability even near the region of the Middle East, whether in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, or anywhere else will for most British people now segue seamlessly into a discussion of *the* Middle East conflict. Even the wording of that description gives it away. Is it "a" Middle East conflict? No. It is "the" Middle East conflict; the only one.

Any discussion of the region now falls naturally into this groove. If someone in Britain asks about the "problem of the Middle East," it is thought not so much eccentric as simply a mishearing to discuss, say, democratic deficit problems in Saudi Arabia. This author makes a point of this mishearing. If one were to ask about the problems in the Middle East conflict, the response would be: Which particular part of the conflict? The problems associated with the Syrian

dictatorship? The problem of the treatment of the Palestinians by the Egyptians? The problem of corruption and destabilization in Lebanon? No. On every occasion you can be sure what the formulator of the question means. It can mean only one thing, because there is only one problem, and that problem is Israel. It follows of course that once that problem is sorted out, then and only then could any progress be made on any other regional problems.

As previously intimated, the British public has been led astray by a very deliberate campaign organized by very bad people. This campaign has been well aimed, but the public was ripe to fall for such a con-trick. The reason is not so much political as philosophical.

Since the 1970s, there has been a remarkable and still too-little understood evisceration of the British soul. This can be boiled down to a number of factors. First, the “European disease,” which has filtered even into Britain, which teaches that nationalism, having led one particular European power very wrong in the past, is the major problem of our continent. It has followed from this that not only is nationalism wrong, but patriotism as well. Any sense of pride in country has been not merely derided but portrayed as the path to inhumanity. The deliberate breaking-down of any sense of national pride is seen as desirable by political elites, because it was thought by them to be the best way to make Britons more tolerant of the mass immigration which successive governments forced on the population.

Then there has been the accelerated collapse not just of attendance at, but also in the leadership of, the established Church of England. These complementary phenomena--perhaps best exemplified by the Archbishop of Canterbury’s comments on the “inevitability” of the place of Shari’a law (Islamic law) in Britain’s future--has left the traditional moral-compass of the nation unspoken for and the moral center of the country vacant. The situation that emerged from this is that perhaps best described in 1987 by Saul Bellow, when he noted that once public virtue becomes a

ghost town it becomes a place “into which anyone can move and declare himself sheriff.”

One of the sets of people who would declare themselves such are fundamentalist Islamists. Their aims in the UK as in other Western democracies are frequently expressed and well-documented, and they desire the annihilation and ending of the state of Israel. What is to some extent more troubling, and harder to pin down, is why so many non-Muslims in Britain have joined them in becoming so hostile to Israel.

In 2007, the novelist Martin Amis returned to Britain after a stint abroad. Asked by a newspaper what was the worst thing he had seen since returning to the UK he answered, “The most depressing thing was the sight of middle-class white demonstrators, last August [2007], waddling around under placards saying, ‘We Are All Hezbollah Now’ [this was during the 2006 war].” “Well,” Amis went on, “make the most of being Hezbollah while you can... To put it another way, they are up the arse of those that want them dead.”

This is certainly the most striking change in anti-Israel or pro-terrorist activity in the UK in recent years. The emergence of, for want of a better term, the “useful idiots”--white middle-class British people who if they see themselves as being on either side of the conflict will see themselves as being pro-Palestinian and therefore (they are sure one has to follow the other) against Israel. The question why this situation has arisen is linked to the point made above about the loss of morality in the public square. Yet as the Cambridge theologian Don Cupitt has convincingly argued, while Britain may be a post-Christian society, it is not one in which Christian principles are entirely absent. Rather, it is one in which the inheritance of Christian ideas persists, simply without church dogma behind it. Thus, the principle of charity and helping the weak remains. So too does a British sense of support for the under-dog in conflicts. All that is needed is to present a particular side as the under-dog, and over time one will get the support of the British public.

What is most telling of all is that many British people unquestioningly believe that they are demonstrating virtue when they express support for Palestinians to the detriment of Israel while attempting to discuss Middle Eastern affairs. Societies in which a moral definition of “virtue” is hard to pin down are not necessarily societies in which people do not want to express virtue. They are societies in which people have to find new ways in which to be seen to be demonstrating virtue.

This sentiment mixes, fatally, with ignorance and the propaganda of bad people. The level of ignorance about the history and details of what is by anybody’s analysis a complex history cannot be overestimated. The commonplace version of that history in Britain is, not accidentally, the same as the Islamist version of the narrative. That is, that after the Holocaust--and as an apology for it--European Jews were allowed to dispossess Arabs from Arab land and create a state of their own; and that the history of the state since its inception has been of Israeli oppression of the true native people as well as a continual land-grabbing attempt against Palestinian territory. Among other things, this narrative is accepted by vast swathes of the public because it plays into a receptive feature of the collective memory. It echoes European colonialist stories. It also--attractively enough for many Europeans and sadly now to many Brits as well--suggests that no people is uniquely free of the same historical stains.

The fact that this is ahistorical is not the point here. Rather the point is that this version of the story goes almost unchallenged. From there, it is not hard for people to be taken advantage of by further embellishments and distortions of the story. Amid all of this is of course the desire to support people believed to be uniquely suffering, uniquely hard done-by, and therefore uniquely deserving of protection: the Palestinians. The nature of the countries that surround Israel and indeed the Palestinians is not focused on at all in this narrative. Of course neither is the possibility that any of these nations have the gift of relieving the Palestinian plight. That

capability is seen, from the title of the conflict on, as being solely the gift of Israel. If the Palestinians fail to achieve their state it is because Israel does not let them have it.

This reading of the situation is popularized by the media, especially the BBC, the *Guardian* and the *Independent* newspapers, and acquiesced in by the three main political parties including one--the Liberal Democrats--with the most violent anti-Israeli activists in their hierarchy. In this situation, progressing from general support for the creation of a Palestinian state into denigration of the Israeli state is an easy and much-encouraged move.

In Britain in 2010, denigration of Israel is not just acceptable, it is thought by many people to be morally virtuous, a demonstration of seriousness as well as wisdom. It is an attitude that has not only rotted through our political and public life, it is something that is encountered by supporters and sympathizers of Israel in their private and professional lives.

How will this situation be turned around? Only in the way in which it was first created. By painstakingly, piece by piece, taking apart the lies that have been disseminated and replacing these lies with truths; by teaching facts where people have been taught careful lies; and by reminding the British people that the direction in which their hatreds are heading in the twenty-first century are diametrically opposite to the noblest efforts in which their country involved itself during the twentieth.

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