

THE UNDENIABLE OVERLAP: RIGHT-WING ZIONISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

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Introduction

Despite a wealth of empirical evidence, from overlapping board memberships among think tanks, to examples of Islamophobic tropes in pro-Israel propaganda, little scholarly attention had been paid to the overlap between Islamophobia and Zionism. However, because it is important to locate the material base for the circulation of ideas in society in order to understand whose interests are being served, this article focuses on some of the convergences in the funding networks of organised anti-Islam and pro-Israel groups. While one reason the funding nexus has been under examined may be to do with practical issues around data collection where non-transparent think tanks are concerned, another factor is likely to be the highly politicised nature of the issue. With this in mind, any discussion should be specific and fully evidenced – but should not be shied away from.

The ‘Islamophobia industry’ in the USA

Though the roots of Islamophobia are transnational and centuries old, it is possible to identify and even quantify contemporary efforts to keep it alive. In 2011, the Center for American Progress (CAP)¹ produced a report², which examined the so-called ‘misinformation experts’ (as well as the politicians and media outlets) propagating Islamophobic ideas in the public sphere. While millions of Americans were being reached – and perhaps influenced – by these ideas, behind them was ‘a small, tightly networked group’ sustained by ‘funding from a clutch of key foundations’ pumping large amounts of money into the network. The data CAP compiled³ traced donations from the seven most significant donors⁴ to the eight most significant recipient bodies⁵. The activities of each organisation are detailed in the CAP report and will not be repeated here, save for one indicative example – the Donors Capital Fund gave a single block grant of \$18 million to the Clarion Fund in 2008, the same year the group distributed 28 million copies of the Islamophobic film *Obsession*, while Barack Obama was running for president and conspiracy theories about him being a ‘secret Muslim’ abounded. In total, these seven foundations and charitable trusts put \$42.5 million into the promotion of Islamophobia during the period studied (2001 to 2009). It is also worth noting the complexity of the money flows. For example, Robert Spencer’s Jihad Watch received money not only from Aubrey and Joyce Chernick’s Fairbrook Foundation, but also from some of the other major recipients, including the David Horowitz Freedom Center.

Israel-related funding from Islamophobia industry donors

The CAP report notes the Zionist connections of many of the personnel involved in the Islamophobia industry and Israel crops up frequently among other causes receiving donations from these foundations, but CAP did not explore this very obvious intersection. However, the link has been examined by Elly Bulkin and Donna Nevel⁶, who went back to the IRS 990 forms of the same seven foundations and collected the data on the Israel-related donations they had made. The headline figure here is that the total amount given by the same seven major Islamophobia industry donors to Israel-related causes is nearly \$11 million.

It is important to note that Bulkin and Nevel collected data between 2001-2010, one year more than the period across which CAP tracked Islamophobia donations. In addition, CAP limited itself solely to the top seven foundations.⁷ Therefore, caution is needed when interpreting the data. Nonetheless, the figures demonstrate an *undeniable overlap* in the giving patterns of at least four out of seven of the foundations, which as well as funding Islamophobia, gave indisputably significant amounts to Zionist projects during roughly the same period: The Anchorage Foundation & William Rosenwald Family Fund gave around \$1.1 million; Fairbrook Foundation gave almost \$1.8 million; Newton & Rochelle Becker Foundations & Charitable Trust gave just under \$2.4 million; and the Russell Berrie Foundation gave \$4.6 million.

However it is also important to note that the overlap is by no means absolute or comprehensive: Donors Capital Fund gave just under \$1 million, which compared to the \$20 million donations it channelled to the Islamophobia industry is relatively small; Lynde and Harry Bradley foundation gave only \$70,000 to Israel-related projects; while the Richard Mellon Scaife foundations are not known to have given to any Israel-related projects.

An undeniable overlap?

Before trying to assess why pro-Israel and anti-Muslim sentiments are frequently found together it is necessary to address a critique which exemplifies the aforementioned highly politicised nature of the issue. The Community Security Trust (CST) is a British organisation which works to monitor and combat antisemitism in the UK, but has also been involved in pro-Israel initiatives. In a 2011 article titled 'Zionism and Islamophobia', Dave Rich of the CST argued that to point to any association between the two sets of ideas is:

a conspiracy theory which originates with Islamist groups, but is no longer limited to those circles. It refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of any concerns about political Islamism, which it conflates with Islam and Muslims in general. It has nothing to do with fighting Islamophobia, but repeatedly shouts down any other voices in that debate.⁸

If we can accept that there are times when the label 'antisemitism' is misused to shield Israel/Zionism from criticism⁹, we should also accept that there are times when the label 'Islamophobia' is misused to shield Islamists/ism from criticism. Equally, however, if we agree with Rich's assertion in the same

article, that ‘the promotion of antisemitic ideas by Islamist groups’ is to some extent a genuine phenomenon of legitimate concern, we must also accept as legitimate – rather than dismissing as ‘conspiracy theory’ – concerns raised about Islamophobic ideas being promoted by some Zionist groups.

It is true that the overlap between Zionism and Islamophobia seems to be much stronger in the USA (though it may be a growing trend in the UK, perhaps best exemplified by the neoconservative British think tank the Henry Jackson Society¹⁰, which has received donations from the USA).¹¹ It is also important to acknowledge clearly that the studies referred to above present data *extracted according to specific preconceived areas of interest* and *exclude* donations related to many other causes. It would no doubt have been possible to manipulate the figures to show some degree of overlap between, say, anti-Muslim donations and educational projects; or Israel-related donations and funding to the arts. However, these figures do not stand alone. Complementing them is a wealth of qualitative data, some of which I will outline now, which suggests that there is a *meaningful link* between Zionism and Islamophobia and some very *rational explanations* for the convergence.

It is nevertheless worth saying that it certainly *would* be an antisemitic conspiracy theory to claim that the data shows that ‘Jews’ are promoting Islamophobia. Indeed this would be a case of opposition to Islamophobia taking the form of antisemitism – the reverse of cases in which ‘opposition to antisemitism takes the form of Islamophobia’.¹² Many, if not most, of the key actors in both pro-Israel lobbying and the Islamophobia industry – for example Christian Zionists and the many ‘native informant’ Muslims¹³ involved – are not Jewish; these are political issues rather than issues determined by ethno-religious identities.

Zionism and Islamophobia

To say, then, that Zionism is not synonymous with Islamophobia is not to ignore the fact that political strands of Zionism (though not cultural forms) involve processes of racialisation and to some extent advocate a racial hierarchy – albeit in a specific geographical context; nor the historical fact that, as ‘a nationalist ideology, and simultaneously a conservative ideological response to European antisemitism, modern Zionism developed in close association and identification with colonialism and imperialist expansion’¹⁴. Put into practice, and embodied in the state of Israel, Zionism has been characterised by decades of occupation, settler colonialism and the ethnic cleansing of indigenous people¹⁵. In addition, due to the necessary preoccupation of Zionism with demography, discrimination against non-Jews living with the 1948 borders of Israel continues. Therefore, in the context of Palestine/Israel it seems that Zionism is *de facto* and *inter alia* Islamophobic, but to equate Zionism and Islamophobia too closely would be to erase the equally clear dispossession of Palestinian Christians. It would also ignore the fact that Zionism is a form of ethnic nationalism which in the land of historic Palestine not only privileges Jews over Muslims (as well as Christians, Arabs and others), but also overlaps with other forms of racism that can operate *even against certain groups of Jews*. For example Ashkenazi Jews are over-represented in the elite strata of Israeli society compared to, for

example, Sephardi Jews¹⁶. At the same time, representation of Mizrahi Jews in ultra-nationalist forms of Zionism currently dominant in Israel is on the rise. Racist discrimination faced by Jews of East African origin, however, has been consistent.

To return to Rich's critique, outside of the context of Palestine/Israel (for example, in the USA and the UK) it is, at least in theory, correct to say that 'there is no reason why someone cannot support Israel in the Middle East and also oppose hate crimes against Muslims in Britain' and that it should not be 'taken for granted that somebody who is a "Zionist" is *ipso facto* anti-Muslim'¹⁷. This was borne out by the funding data cited earlier, which showed that at least one major foundation promoting anti-Muslim hatred appeared to have no links to Israel and two had only minimal connections. Further research could be done to analyse the funding overlap in the opposite direction, in other words starting with Zionist groups and looking at which donors also gave to Islamophobia promotion. However, it is clear that though there might be significant overlap, especially in the USA, it is far from absolute. Furthermore, just as Rich makes clear his opposition to Islamophobia, there are examples – such as Peter Beinart in the USA – of liberal Zionists being involved in anti-Islamophobia campaigns. It is not within the scope of this article to assess whether such initiatives could gain momentum, but given recent pronouncements about 'the end of liberal Zionism'¹⁸ and the 'triumph of neo-Zionism'¹⁹, it seems likely that the space for an anti-racist Zionism – if indeed such an idea was not a paradox all along – is fast diminishing.

Part of the explanation for why there is some overlap between Zionism and Islamophobia may be found in theology, since for many religious Zionists and Christian Zionists 'prophecy is the main driver' of Islamophobia.²⁰ But the embrace of anti-Muslim racism by many other pro-Israel actors in the USA and UK is often motivated by far more pragmatic considerations of political strategy. MJ Rosenberg, formerly of pro-Israel lobby group the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), writing in 2010 about why some pro-Israel actors joined protests against the so-called 'Ground Zero Mosque' in New York suggested that:

It is not because they are instinctive bigots. It is that they believe that the more acceptance there is of Muslims here at home, the less reflexive hatred there will be for Muslims abroad. And that, in their view, reduces America's sympathy for Israel.²¹

This view – that pro-Israel advocates believe Islamophobia encourages sympathy for Israel – was borne out when I interviewed Mitchell Bard, another ex-AIPAC staffer, who made this clear in far less critical terms.²² He brought up the political expediency for Israel of Americans' racism/xenophobia early on in our interview, entirely unprompted, after I asked him to account for popular support for Israel in USA opinion polls. As well as citing similar 'values', the second factor he referred to was 'the activities of the Arabs that reinforce anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotypes'.²³ When prompted to explain, he continued:

I don't like to say this or put it this way but I think most Americans see Arabs as backward, primitive, savages, terrorists and... so every time there's a terrorist attack, it just reinforces what most Americans believe. So if you look at those same polls there's virtually no support for the Palestinians.²⁴

While Bard is not referring to the domestic context and is certainly not saying that AIPAC *deliberately promotes* anti-Muslim or anti-Arab stereotypes, he is clearly making a causal connection between the fact that such stereotypes are pervasive and the fact that few Americans sympathise with the Palestinian cause. The risk here is that, if one accepts this analysis, from an Israel-advocate's perspective it arguably makes sense to perpetuate these ideas, or at the very least not to challenge them. Thus, while Rich may be correct *in theory* that one can support Israel in the Middle East and also oppose hate crimes at home, Rosenberg's account of how the views of people like Bard regarding foreign affairs may end up being applied at home is compelling and problematises Rich's assertion. *In practice*, we can see this phenomenon play out on both sides of the Atlantic.

Arun Kundnani has observed, in the context of the USA, that:

The extent to which pro-Israel lobby groups have cultivated such an atmosphere [of Islamophobia] has reflected their anxiety that the Muslim-American population is growing, and that the political influence of Muslims in the US might one day reflect their numbers.²⁵

This fear – that acceptance of Muslim participation in democratic processes could influence *domestic government policy* on, as well as public attitudes about, the Middle East – has been articulated by Alan Mendoza, director of the UK's Henry Jackson Society, with regard to the European context. When he spoke at the AIPAC conference in Washington, in June 2013, about waning support for Israel on the continent, he pointedly noted that: 'The European Muslim population has doubled in the past 30 years and is predicted to double again by 2040.'²⁶ Therefore, the so-called 'demographic threat' commonly discussed in Israel with regard to Palestinians (referred to as 'Israeli-Arabs'), is transposed to the USA and to Europe. Support for ethnic privilege in one geographical region bleeds into anxiety about the political influence of Muslims (assumed to be homogenous and monolithic) as an ethno-religious group in other contexts. At its most extreme, this demographic argument comes in the shape of the infamous 'Eurabia' conspiracy theory, promulgated by Bat Ye'or, a paranoid Islamophobic fantasy about an elite bargain to transform Europe into an Islamic continent, which gained traction after 9/11 and is popular with the far-right 'counterjihad' movement.²⁷

Conclusion

If the 'war on terror' has stimulated the growth of Islamophobia it has also accelerated the opportunistic positioning of Israel as the 'front-line' of the 'war on terror' by Israeli politicians and Israel-advocates. While these trends were underway well before 9/11, further research is needed into what appears to be a rapidly growing connection, which can likely best be explained by historical contingency. If Islamophobia is fast becoming 'the defining condition of the new Europe'²⁸ and is flourishing in the West more broadly, Israel is increasingly being constructed as defending 'the Judeo-Christian' heritage in a clash of civilisations with 'radical Islam'.²⁹ However, as we have seen, some promoters of Islamophobia have little or no interest in Israel and to argue that Zionism is the *only* or even the *main* cause of anti-Muslim bigotry would be inaccurate and unhelpful, ignoring many other

sources of anti-Muslim prejudice, not least misguided counter-terrorism policies in many Western nation states.³⁰

Islamophobia is much older than the state of Israel and much older than Zionist ideology. In addition, even where an overlap is evident, the instrumentalisation may function in the opposite direction, in the sense that Islamophobes who fear what they perceive as Islamic expansionism ('Islamisation' or 'Islamification') view Israel as a critical bulwark. The overlap between Zionism and Islamophobia is, then, far from absolute and there is no straightforward causal relationship, but it has been argued here that a considerable faction of right-wing Zionists, of the sort who have long dominated pro-Israel politics, are often linked to organised Islamophobia promotion. Though this is not seen as *inevitable*, the 'ethnicization of politics'³¹ flows smoothly from the ethnocentric particularism of Zionist ideology. It is suggested by way of a conclusion that, in the context of growing racism of all forms, any attempt to build a much-needed transversal anti-racist political movement needs to be de-linked from Zionist political imperatives which could preclude its success.

Notes

¹ The Center for American Progress is an economically liberal and socially progressive public policy think tank based in Washington D.C. Founded in 2003, its CEOs have been drawn from Clinton and Obama's Democratic administrations.

² Center for American Progress, *Fear Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America*, 2011, available at: <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/08/pdf/islamophobia.pdf> (last visited 26 Aug. 2015).

³ Data was compiled from publicly accessible USA Internal Revenue Service (IRS) '990' forms, used for tax-exempt organisations such as charitable foundations, for the period between 2001-2009.

⁴ Donors included were: Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation, Anchorage Foundation & William Rosenwald Family Fund, Fairbrook Foundation, Donors Capital Fund, Newton and Rochelle Becker Foundations and Charitable Trust, Richard Mellon Scaife Foundations, and the Russell Berrie Foundation.

⁵ Recipients included were: Investigative Project on Terror, Counterterrorism & Security Education & Research Foundation (CTSERF), Middle East Forum, Center for Security Policy (CSP), Clarion Fund, Jihad Watch, David Horowitz Freedom Center and American Congress for Truth.

⁶ D. Nevel & E. Bulkin, *Islamophobia & Israel*, New York, Route Books, 2014. Bulkin and Nevel are both Jewish American Palestine solidarity activists and anti-Islamophobia campaigners.

⁷ A more expansive 2013 study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) – *Legislating Fear: Islamophobia and its impact in the United States* (<http://www.cair.com/islamophobia/legislating-fear-2013-report.html>) – found that 'an inner core of at least 37 groups' had access to over \$119 million between 2008-2011 alone and identified an additional 32 groups in what it called the 'outer core' whose 'primary purpose does not appear to include promoting prejudice against or hatred of Islam and Muslims but whose work regularly demonstrates or supports Islamophobic themes'.

⁸ D. Rich, 'Zionism and Islamophobia', Community Security Trust, 2011, available at: <http://blog.thecst.org.uk/?p=2328> (last visited 26 Aug. 2015).

⁹ N. Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

¹⁰ The Henry Jackson Society is a good example of the fact that the distinction between 'groups promoting Islamophobia' and 'groups promoting Israel' is not clear cut – often one will do the other as a side-effect, or vice versa.

¹¹ T. Griffin, H. Aked, D. Miller & S. Marusek, 'The Henry Jackson Society and the Degeneration of British Neoconservatism: Liberal Interventionism, Islamophobia and the "War on Terror"', London, Public Interest Investigations, 2015, available at: http://www.spinwatch.org/images/Reports/HJS_spinwatch%20report_web_2015.pdf (last visited 26 Aug. 2015).

- ¹² B. Klug, Panel discussion: 'Israel and Antisemitism in Britain: Now and in the Future', Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, Birkbeck, University of London, 10 December 2014.
- ¹³ L. Fekete, *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe*, London, Pluto Press, 2009, 126.
- ¹⁴ Y. Abu-Laban & A. Bakan, 'The racial contract: Israel/Palestine and Canada', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 14(5), 2008, 637-660, 644.
- ¹⁵ I. Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford, One World, 2006.
- ¹⁶ H. Rose & S. Rose, 'Israel, Europe and the academic boycott', *Race & Class*, 50(1), 2008, 1-20.
- ¹⁷ D. Rich, 'Zionism and Islamophobia'.
- ¹⁸ A. Lerman, 'The end of liberal Zionism', *New York Times*, 11 August 2014, available at: www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/opinion/sunday/israels-move-to-the-right-challenges-diaspora-jews.html (last visited 26 Aug. 2015).
- ¹⁹ I. Pappe, *The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge*, London, Verso, 2014, 247.
- ²⁰ N. Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims*, London, Pluto Press, 2012, 121.
- ²¹ M.L. Rosenberg, 'Inside Story: Why ADL is Opposing Ground Zero Mosque', *Huffington Post*, 31 July 2010, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mj-rosenberg/inside-story-why-adl-is-o_b_666281.html (last visited 26 Aug. 2015).
- ²² Whereas Rosenberg has become something of a whistle-blower after leaving AIPAC, Bard remains closely involved in many right-wing Zionist initiatives.
- ²³ Interview, 1 May 2013, Washington D.C.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ A. Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror*, London, Verso, 2014, 274.
- ²⁶ S. Pollak, 'At AIPAC conference, talk of Europe's anti-Israel stance', *Washington Jewish Week*, 7 March 2013.
- ²⁷ M. Carr, 'You are now entering Eurabia', *Race & Class*, 48(1), 2006, 1-22.
- ²⁸ M. Bunzl, *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe*, Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007, 4.
- ²⁹ Again, such constructions erase the very existence of Palestinian Christians and need to be unpicked.
- ³⁰ G. Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the War on Terror*, London, Zed Books, 2008.
- ³¹ P. Guerlain, 'The Israel lobby, American democracy and foreign perceptions of the USA', *Journal of Public Affairs*, 11(4), 2011, 372-381, 374.

Biographical note

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