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*A plea for a critical and democratic debate*

Dayan, H.; Jansen, Y.

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# Antisemitism, anti-Palestinian racism and Europe

## A plea for a critical and democratic debate

**Hilla Dayan, Yolande Jansen**

21 February 2024

The EU and individual European countries are not bystanders to the 'Israel-Palestine conflict' but enmeshed in it both historically and today. Using charges of antisemitism to preempt criticism of Israel doesn't just erode the concept morally and politically, but also excuses Europe of its responsibility for the Palestinians' oppression.

In May 2023, we published an [essay](#) in *De Nederlandse Boekengids/The Dutch Review of Books* about the responsibility of Europe and European institutions towards the situation in Israel and Palestine. This was a few months after the last Netanyahu cabinet took power in January 2023. We wanted to highlight what was at stake in Europe, addressing the complexity of the phenomenon of antisemitism tied to critique of Israel, and the danger of repressing an important democratic debate.

While we had anticipated a further deterioration of the situation in Israel/Palestine, we could not have imagined the level of deterioration brought by the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 and the horrendous aftermath in Gaza and Palestine. What follows is English translation of the essay with a few additions, marked in square parentheses, along with an afterword about the politics of anti-antisemitism in the context of the current war in Israel/Palestine.

*Hilla Dayan & Yolande Jansen, February 2024*

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Palestinian-Arab prisoners of war in 1948. Benno Rothenberg /Meitar Collection / National Library of Israel / The Pritzker Family National Photography Collection / CC BY 4.0 / Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In European media and politics, the EU and individual European countries are often



portrayed as bystanders to 'the Israeli-Palestinian conflict'. But in fact, they are fundamentally enmeshed in the situation in Israel/Palestine, both but historically and in the present. How we understand and oppose antisemitism in Europe is not a separate issue. At a time when various organisations are raising the alarm about growing antisemitism in Europe, and when, for example, a National Coordinator for Combatting Antisemitism (NCAB) has been appointed in the Netherlands, it is important to consider the wider political and historical context of the debate. We must take into account not only antisemitism in Europe, both historical and contemporary, but also the situation in Israel/Palestine and Europe's position in relation to it.

In the current context, what we do or do not consider to constitute 'antisemitism' has implications not only for the situation of Jews in Europe (and worldwide), but also for political positioning in relation to the state of Israel. People who criticize Israel are regularly accused of antisemitism. Palestinians especially, but also other critics, are marginalised and even criminalised as a result. Critical reflection on the use of the term is crucial for Jews in Europe precisely *because* a sustainable, morally sound, and politically legitimate understanding of antisemitism is necessary for their protection.

However, critical reflection is equally necessary to counter Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian attitudes and practices in Europe. It is also vital because of the scale and degree of the violence against Palestinians in Israel and the occupied - now in effect largely annexed - Palestinian territories.

As academics specializing in Israel/Palestine and European minorities, and as Dutch citizens of diverse backgrounds, we share a deep and personal interest in the history that caused Jewish refugees from both Europe and the Middle East to flee to what was Palestine, and after 1948 the state of Israel. The lives of the people who became citizens of the State of Israel form part of the continental and colonial history of Europe. Academics in our field share a concern with the responsibility that Europe bears to the trajectory of Jewish migration to Israel, and with the role this has played in fulfilling Jewish national aspirations, both historical and contemporary, as well as the consequences for Palestine and Palestinians.

The current Israeli government is chipping away further at the few remaining rights guaranteed to Palestinians in a state that defines itself as 'the nation state of the Jewish people'. In what follows, our main concern is to recognize the history of European imperialism and settler colonialism that laid the foundations for this situation and that has ramifications through to the present. Effectively prisoners of this history, the Palestinians now face the prospect of disasters even greater than those they have suffered in the past.

We also turn our attention to current discussions in Europe that testify to a problematic understanding of antisemitism. The concept, we argue, is often used to pre-emptively exclude criticism of Israel's actions towards the Palestinian people. Such an opportunistic use of the concept of antisemitism can only harm a sustainable approach to antisemitism. It reduces Jews to their historical position in Europe, where they were sometimes protected and commended, and at other times persecuted, but invariably treated as 'others' and played off against other population groups. This naturally also affects Palestinians, people with Muslim and/or Arab background, and other critics of the



situation; their voices are at best scarcely heard, and at worst silenced by political or legal means.

## Nationality law

Netanyahu's current coalition government includes a number of extremist, ultra-nationalist parties and individuals. Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich of the Religious Zionism Party (formerly National Union - Tkuma) is a vocal supporter of the annexation of the West Bank on religious grounds. He is also 'proudly homophobic' and lives in an illegal settlement in the occupied territories. Even more extreme is Itamar Ben-Gvir, the Minister of National Security and leader of the far-right Jewish Power party (Otzma Jehudit). Known for his slogan 'the village must burn', Ben-Gvir is a follower of Rabbi Meir Kahane, who was an advocate of the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank and murdered in 1990.

While Kahane's *Kach* party was boycotted by other political parties in the early 1990s and later banned, Ben-Gvir's popularity has only increased throughout his career. He was banned from serving in the Israeli army because of his extremist views, was convicted of incitement to hatred in 2007, and is known for inciting far-right activities. His idol is the terrorist Baruch Goldstein, who killed 29 Palestinians and injured 125 in Hebron in 1994. [In October 2023, Ben-Gvir launched a campaign to arm citizens and form vigilante militias. Both Smotrich and Ben-Gvir's latest ambition is to build new Jewish settlements in Gaza.]

The situation that has arisen in Israel since the last elections is not a chance development, but the outcome of a long process in which structural legal, political, economic, and cultural inequalities between Jews and Palestinians have been systematically exacerbated, both within Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories. 'Israel is not the state of all its inhabitants ... but the nation state of the Jewish people, and theirs alone,' posted Benjamin Netanyahu on Twitter in March 2019. He thereby confirmed the reality that the state of Israel has for years discriminated against millions of Palestinians, whether they live in Israel or in the Occupied Territories (and whether or not they have Israeli citizenship).

Discrimination against Palestinians and the prioritising of Jews was legally enshrined in the *Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People*, adopted in 2018. In 2021 and 2022, well before the current government took office, both [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) published reports on the situation in Israel/Palestine. They characterized the situation in terms of 'apartheid' and 'persecution' according to international law. Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations [Al-Haq](#) (Defending Human Rights), [B'Tselem](#) (Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) and [Yesh Din](#) (Volunteers for Human Rights) also published detailed reports. A [November 2022 UN report](#) prepared by Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese identifies the grave forms these violations take:

draconian restrictions on Palestinian movement inside and outside the occupied Palestinian territory; repression of political and civic participation; denial of residency rights, status and family unification; dispossession of Palestinian land and property; forcible transfers; unlawful killings; widespread arbitrary arrests



and detention, including of children; the obstruction and denial of humanitarian aid and cooperation; the denial of ownership and access to natural resources; settler violence; and violent suppression of popular resistance against the occupation. All together, these practices constitute collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

Europe is indifferent to such warnings and has allowed the situation to deteriorate further. Writing in the newspaper *NRC* on 19 October 2022, the former Dutch diplomat Berber van der Woude said that paying attention to the human rights reports was deemed 'inopportune' in diplomatic circles. Van der Woude, who had been posted to the Palestinian territories in the summer of 2019 and resigned in early 2022 in frustration at the situation, argued that the Netherlands, like most other European countries and the EU, was complicit in maintaining apartheid. This, she said, caused Dutch and EU human rights policy in other contexts to seem like double standards.

Prime Minister Rutte's telephone conversation with Netanyahu upon the latter's re-election on 11 January 2023, in which Rutte told the Israeli PM that the new cabinet should not 'jeopardize the two-state solution', while ignoring Netanyahu's explicit objection to any discussion on political settlement, was a good example of how disconnected from reality the European position is. [In the context of the war in Gaza, Netanyahu has hardened his rejectionism, refusing to discuss 'the day after' in Gaza even with his own war cabinet, in clear defiance of US pressure.] Europe effectively endorses Netanyahu's cabinet's annexation and settlement policy and gives a license for serious human rights violations.

However, European refusal to recognise or acknowledge the situation does not go entirely unchallenged, as was demonstrated by the termination of cooperation by the mayor of Barcelona with twin city Tel Aviv. [In February 2024, the US, followed by the UK and France, issued unprecedented sanctions against a few individual 'violent settlers'. A recent court ruling in the Netherlands accepted human rights advocates' arguments citing grave violations of human rights and blocked the shipment of jet-fighter parts to Israel. These are encouraging signs of an emerging will to enforce compliance with international human rights norms.]

## **Definitions of antisemitism**

While the politics of apartheid have gained an increasing foothold in Israel, there has been growing uncertainty in Europe about the connection between antisemitism and 'criticism of Israel'. This partly explains European passivity towards Israel. Europeans have grown accustomed to the virtuous feeling that antisemitism was something they left behind after the Second World War. For the European mainstream, it is primarily 'Others' - Muslims, Arabs, people from the global South, Eastern Europeans - who are antisemitic, and no longer 'us'. In 2014, cultural studies scholar Esther Romeyn analysed how white Dutch people often considered themselves to be tolerant, as having learned the 'lessons of the Holocaust', while automatically assuming the opposite of Muslims. Antisemitism is thus effectively externalized.

In 2016, in the midst of the far-right hijacking of the antisemitism agenda, the



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) proposed a definition of antisemitism. It reads as follows: 'Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.' The IHRA definition was actively supported and promoted by the Israeli government and is now frequently used as a basis for policy and even legislation. The Dutch Centre for Information and Documentation on Israel (CIDI) uses and advocates this definition, for example, as does the Dutch House of Representatives, the German Bundestag and the French Parliament.

There has been considerable criticism of the IHRA definition from experts. Not only is it vague ('a *certain* perception'; 'that *can* express itself as hatred'), it also ignores the institutional and organised dimensions of antisemitism and reduces it to perception and feelings. Particularly problematic, however, are the examples given, many of which involve criticism of the State of Israel, and which are introduced by the sentence: 'Manifestations might include the targeting of the State of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity.' Exactly what this means is left open. What does it mean to conceive the State of Israel as 'a Jewish collectivity'? What does it mean in the context of structural discrimination against Palestinians? Is criticism of that discrimination therefore to be classed as antisemitism?

The insufficient distinction between antisemitism and criticism of Israel is partly due to the introduction of the term 'new antisemitism' in the 1970s. The assumption was that traditional European antisemitism had taken on a new, anti-Zionist form: an overcritical approach to, and disproportionate focus on, the Israeli state. Using the IHRA definition, anti-Zionism is almost by definition antisemitism, and criticism of Israel can easily be dismissed as having 'disproportionate focus', so that there is no longer any need to engage with the actual content of the criticism.

Back in 2004, the British philosopher of language Brian Klug argued that equating anti-Zionism and antisemitism was problematic because it made it impossible to criticise discrimination against non-Jewish populations, in particular against Palestinians, within the State of Israel. In a lecture in 2021, Klug described how the 'tangled web' of interwoven racial, ethnic, national, religious and political definitions of Jewishness - the legacy of European history - plays an important role in this confusion.

In 2020, a more precise definition of antisemitism was formulated in The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA). Some of the world's leading researchers on antisemitism and the Holocaust, contributed to this new definition, which was intended as an alternative to the IHRA definition, and it was endorsed by many scholars in these fields of study. In October 2022, many JDA signatories called on the UN not to adopt the IHRA definition. The JDA notes that antisemitism is a form of racism, and that criticism of Israel, provided it is proportionate and fact-based, should not be considered antisemitic; neither should calling for a boycott of Israel because of its apartheid policy towards the Palestinians.

This is important, because in the case of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign (BDS), such calls are often seen as antisemitic and in many European countries outlawed as such. Because of her support for BDS, the well-known British playwright Caryl



Churchill was recently stripped of her European Drama Prize (a prestigious German stage award), for example. For the same reason, philosophers Judith Butler and Achille Mbembe, as well as many artists and scientists with a (partially) Palestinian background, such as Anna-Esther Younes and Yazan Khalili, have also been accused of antisemitism. Serious personal, professional and legal consequences have ensued, particularly for the Palestinians amongst this group.

The JDA emphasizes that antisemitism manifests itself in attitudes or beliefs towards Jewish people, and not towards the State of Israel: 'Denying the right of Jews in the State of Israel to exist and flourish, collectively and individually, as Jews, in accordance with the principle of equality' (Definition: B.10). The explanation in the JDA thus shifts the focus from the state to the population, emphasizing the importance of equality between Jews and non-Jews within Israel/Palestine (and beyond). Criticism of the ethnocratic character of the state of Israel therefore does not in itself constitute antisemitism. On the basis of the IHRA definition, however, pleas for a different, more just form of government are easily interpreted as antisemitic: according to the IHRA definition, criticism of the Jewish character of the state of Israel can easily be labelled as 'targeting Jews' and therefore as antisemitic.

The JDA definition is itself not unproblematic, however. It does not relinquish the focus on Israel/Palestine and anti-Zionism, and pays insufficient attention to far-right, organised, institutional and cultural dimensions of historical and contemporary antisemitism. Another difficult aspect of the JDA declaration is its failure to follow up its proposition that critical statements about Israel are not antisemitic 'on the face of it' with any guidance on how to distinguish genuine criticism and antisemitism concealed as criticism.

Of course, no definition of antisemitism can be made *a priori*: the very notion of intent is inevitably a matter of the biography of the speaker and the context of the utterance, as Brian Klug, one of the initiators and authors of the JDA, argued. [1] [Take, for instance, the case of the Palestinian-American adjunct lecturer, who at a pro-Palestinian teach-in called on students to resist not only Zionist Israel ('this land isn't for the Jews, I'm sorry') but also 'Zionist New York', and was immediately suspended. Was this 'on the face of it' antisemitism? The context was a Gaza war teach-in; the identity, that of a member of an oppressed group; the staunch anti-Zionism, even if expressed in objectionable style, the legitimate ideological stance of a Palestinian in the diaspora. What we see in this example is how definitions reduce people and contexts to single utterances. Circumstances are an afterthought.]

## **Zionism and European colonialism**

*Zionism* is a crucial concept in this tangle. Europeans often know little about Zionism, except that criticism of it feels like it might be antisemitic. Does a critique of 'Zionism' target Israel's existence as a state, the Jewish inhabitants of that state, or a state in which Jews have more rights than other inhabitants? Was Zionism about creating a safe haven for Jewish people who had lost all faith in life in the diaspora after the Holocaust, or was it a typical product of the European nationalist and colonial imagination? What if all the above are true, while also expressing contradictory interpretations depending on positions vis-a-vis Zionism?



Because of the many layers of meaning within the term 'Zionism', it can easily be used as the hook linking 'critique of Israel' and 'antisemitism'. Suffice it to say that Zionism arose long before World War II and was encouraged by the British and the French, who had colonised parts of the Arab world, including Palestine. It gained further momentum in the context of European antisemitism and the Holocaust. However, the belief that the existence of a state defined as Jewish is both the realization of an ancient dream and a historical necessity, and that this state is at the core of Jewish identity, is a specific ideological choice expressing a specific (albeit hegemonic) form of nationalist identification, out of a broad spectrum of Jewish political traditions, and a broader historical spectrum of Zionism.

Before the Second World War, the largest Jewish movement in eastern Europe was the Bund, which was opposed to Zionism. And before 1948, Zionists were a minority among Jews in the Middle East and North Africa. Even today there are many Jewish groups that oppose Zionism, movements from liberal, reform and conservative wings. They are regularly in conflict with the state of Israel and oppose, for example, the de-legitimisation of Jewish life outside Israel in the name of Zionism.

A painful example of this was Netanyahu's call for Jews to leave 'Muslim Europe' after the Charlie Hebdo murders in Paris. Here, Netanyahu brought together the three most fundamental values of state Zionism: the desire to unite all Jews in Israel; a denial of the legitimacy and viability of life 'in exile'; and the conviction that a Jewish nation-state is necessary to ensure the security and prosperity of Jewish people. The reference to 'Muslim Europe' illustrates how this rhetoric fuels European xenophobia *and* links all Jewish people, whether they like it or not, with Israel. Netanyahu affirmed Jews' affinity with a dominant European 'civilized' society, while in the same breath undermining that affinity. It is precisely this type of Zionist logic that undermines the interests of European minorities, both Jewish and Muslim.

The historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin became famous for his analysis of Zionism's internalized antisemitism, evinced by its rejection of Jewish diaspora life. In his recent book, *Mishna Consciousness, Biblical Consciousness*, he writes about the city of Safed in the sixteenth century and Jewish communities in Galilee, who had a spiritual interpretation of 'Zion' as well as a consciousness of exile, or '*Mishna* consciousness'. They were committed to the continuation of Jewish life but did not see themselves as rulers over other population groups. They lived next to and amongst Arabs and were viewed as the original inhabitants of the land. Their legacy was negated by the rise of political Zionism, which went hand in hand with European colonialism, especially British colonialism after the First World War. This Zionism was heavily inspired by the European colonial imagination and developed a literal interpretation of Zion.

The roots of this concept, argues Raz-Krakotzkin, lie in Protestant legitimations of European conquests in the 'New World' - the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. These conquests were presented as a return to a promised land. The example of Safed offers an alternative vision where Jewish people belong to the region and are not swept up into a vision of nation-state sovereignty over the 'natives' - a colonial worldview which led to ethnic and cultural cleansing not only in Israel, but everywhere where European colonisation took place. Such an alternative vision has never been more urgent than now.





Of the many flavours of Zionism, the Christian variety is undoubtedly the one most closely associated with the history of the Protestant colonial imagination. Christian Zionism has played an important role in the US in the increasingly religio-political interpretation of Zionism, and thus in the religious legitimization of the occupation of the West Bank. Dutch Christians are also sometimes associated with this movement, as David Wertheim discusses in his recent book *Waar gaat het over als het over Joden gaat?* ('What is it about when it comes to Jews?') Wertheim examines the image of Jews held by various Dutch groups and finds that, in every group he studies, a concern with Jews is a reflection of the group itself.

Christian Zionists, such as the *Christenen voor Israël* (Christians for Israel) Foundation in the Netherlands, support Israel from the perspective of their own salvation, and favour the occupation of the Palestinian territories ('Samaria and Judea', the so-called 'Biblical heartland') because of the theological significance they assign to it. The former leader of the *ChristenUnie* (Christian Union) Party, Gert-Jan Segers, wrote at the end of November 2022 in *Israël Actueel* (the magazine of the Christians for Israel Foundation, with a circulation 78,000), that he 'cannot see constantly re-emerging antisemitism other than as a diabolical attempt to rid the world of Jews. It's a reverse proof of the existence of God.'

Together with People's Party minister Dilan Yeşilgöz, Segers initiated the creation of the post of National Coordinator for Combating Anti-Semitism. For a critique of this institution, see Jeff Handmaker & Wim Scholten, 'Pak antisemitisme aan als vorm van discriminatie en racisme: Nationaal Coördinator Antisemitismebestrijding staat échte bestrijding van antisemitisme in de weg'. *Beleid & Maatschappij*, 14 (2) 133 (2023), online at: [Pak\\_antisemitisme\\_aan\\_als\\_vorm\\_van\\_discriminatie\\_en\\_racisme.pdf \(eur.nl\)](#) In response to a question from journalist Natasja Gibbs about apartheid in Israel during an *Op1* broadcast aired in January 2023, Segers held the state of Israel up as an example for the Middle East; this exchange led to a small media storm - but because of Gibbs's question, not of Segers's response.

In the contemporary context, the terms 'Zionism' and 'anti-Zionism' are frequently used and the distinction is more or less clear: Zionism affirms the dominance of Jews in Israel and the Jewish character of the Israeli state; anti-Zionism means recognising responsibility for the dispossession and expulsion of the Palestinians (the *Nakba*) in 1948, opposition to the occupation of the West Bank, and to the practice of privileging the Jews in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, especially over the Palestinians. Anti-Zionism is therefore also a position *against* the discriminatory message and practices of Netanyahu and many others, who, with Ben-Gvir and Smotrich in government, are eager to fulfil their dreams of violent ethnic cleansing. It is a critical position against inequality, held by progressive Israelis and Palestinians alike.

But do distinctions between 'pro' and 'anti' positions actually help? Instead of weighing complex and context-related phenomena, the debate easily leads to stereotyping and the reduction of any perspective to a side: you are either 'pro-Israel' or you are 'antisemitic'; a point of view is either 'Zionist' or 'anti-Zionist'. Moreover, 'anti-Zionism' is a narrow reduction of 'critique of Israel', because that too can come in many shades. The terminology demonstrates how politicised and one-sided the discussion has become. Every thought immediately seems to imply a position, or even a concealed position. For



example: anti-Zionism equals antisemitism; Zionism is morally wrong. In such an atmosphere, real debate, let alone dialogue, becomes impossible. Injustices cannot be identified (or sanctioned), and fears, anger and other emotions cannot be voiced. But this is precisely what is so urgently needed for generating conditions for co-existence in Israel/Palestine.

## Debates and censorship in Europe

Europe bears a large share of responsibility for the situation in Israel/Palestine, both historically and through its unconditional support for and cooperation with Israel today. This cooperation takes place not only in the fields of medicine and technology, but also through the security and weapons industry. Too little thought is given to how to end complicity with the Israeli oppression of Palestinians, while still taking responsibility for the European history of antisemitism. This history includes not just the Holocaust but also the ways in which Jewish minorities in the European colonies were often played off against others, to the point at which their positions became untenable (see, for example, [this letter](#) by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, addressing the history of Algerian Jews).

Instead, European policies on antisemitism are often superficial and repressive. This plays into the hands of Israel's apartheid policy and burdens Jews in Europe by persistently associating them with unjust policies. Democratic forces that challenge this, be they Palestinian, Jewish, Israeli or other, far from being assisted, are actively opposed. Many experts, critical academics and artists living in Europe, especially those with a Jewish, Palestinian and/or Israeli background, have a limited public profile and impact because of associations with antisemitism. Insofar as they have a voice, it is mainly limited to cultural and academic circles, with little or no hearing in politics or the public media. Speaking out is regularly met with considerable pressure or even libellous accusations - as in 2016, when the CIDI tried to shut down a conference at the University of Amsterdam organized by [gate48](#), a platform of critical Israelis in the Netherlands, by alleging incitement to antisemitism; or in 2022, when anthropologist Dina Zbeidy, originally from Palestine and affiliated with Leiden University for years, was prevented by the university from chairing a debate on Israeli politics.

While this dynamic plays a role in all European countries, it has become most visible in Germany. The German chapter of Amnesty International removed Amnesty International's own report on Israeli apartheid from its website soon after its publication in 2021, referring readers to the English-language section. The German website reads: 'In the current historical national context, an objective, evidence-based debate about the classification made in this report is difficult. To avoid the risk of instrumentalisation or misinterpretation, the German chapter of Amnesty will not be planning or carrying out any activities relative to this report.' The Israeli-British-German essayist Michael Sappir responded that, while Amnesty Germany should be careful not to feed antisemitic ideologies, by removing the report it had effectively rendered discussion of fact-based criticism out of bounds.

When, in 2022, we suggested to a German colleague to introduce Gil Hochberg's book *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archive Imagination of the Future* (2021), winner of the prestigious American René Wellek Prize, she said that it would lead directly to her dismissal and that she could not risk it. In fall 2022, the Goethe Institute in Tel Aviv cited



'security reasons' for calling off a panel discussion at which German and Israeli scholars, including the renowned historian Amos Goldberg, were to have considered memorial cultures related to the Holocaust and the Nakba. The cancellation was a result of protests from the German Foreign Ministry and Yad Vashem.

Meanwhile, initiatives to counter antisemitism are being developed that intended to make events and deliberations almost superfluous through using tech fixes - a form of technological 'solutionism' that distances Europe both from the situation in Israel and its own history of antisemitism. For example, in a project called *Decoding Antisemitism*, the Alfred Landecker Foundation is developing an algorithm for 'content management', with the aim of automating the fight against antisemitism. The aim to reduce a complex ethical, historical, political and cultural phenomenon into a 'big data' project bears witness to an anti-intellectual and anti-expertise culture in Europe, in which debate is considered undesirable, and in which open and complex political debates lose out to the 'magic wand' of the algorithm. Predictably, the 'decode antisemitism' algorithm has already taken the IHRA definition as its basis.

Events surrounding *Documenta 15* in Kassel in summer 2022 demonstrate how not just the German, but the entire European (and indeed global) cultural world now has an 'antisemitism' problem. As early as January 2022, allegations of antisemitism sparked debate across Europe, and a grim atmosphere lasted throughout the summer. At the beginning of September 2022, the art institutions *Framer Framed*, the Arts Academy of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Eindhoven Van Abbemuseum organized a two-day symposium titled *(un)Common Grounds: Reflecting on documenta fifteen*. The symposium. It was portrayed in advance as a 'platform for an antisemitic film' by the rightwing newspaper *De Telegraaf*, and a concerned response from the CIDI tried to exert pressure on the organisers. The Palestinian artist Yazan Khalili, who is in Amsterdam for his PhD research and who represented Palestinian collective *The Question of Funding* at *Documenta 15*, spoke at the symposium about his experience of 'being vilified for nine months'. He described how anyone associated with the BDS movement in Germany is immediately barred from all forms of funding or facilitation (such as access to conference rooms). Academic and artistic freedom and freedom of speech in general is thereby eradicated using financial rather than legal means.

One of the participants of the *Framer Framed* gathering was Benjamin Seroussi, director of the Jewish *Casa do Povo* collective in Brazil. He corrected the prevalent misconception that Jewish artists were excluded from *Documenta 15*. His collective was mentioned by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as one such example. Seroussi wrote to the newspaper pointing out the mistake, but the correction was not published. Seroussi, whose collective aims to decolonise the legacy of the Holocaust and make Jewish heritage relevant to the fight against racial violence in the Brazilian context, warned that playing off Jewish people against a supposedly antisemitic 'global South', as happened frequently in debates in Germany on *documenta 15*, undermines any Jewish decolonising project and will prove no help in the struggle against real antisemitism.

Architect Eyal Weizman, founder of the critical architectural collective Forensic Architecture, saw the furore surrounding *Documenta 15* as part of the war that Israel has declared on those who want to 'delegitimise' it in the global cultural field. The campaign



is part of Israel's policy of *hasbara*, or public relations, in which the situation in Israel/Palestine is presented abroad in a 'positive way'. Weizman argued that the Israeli state is pressuring European institutions and countries to use the concept of antisemitism to form an 'intellectual iron dome' to deflect unwelcome criticism. The major problem in the German and broader European context, Weizman argued, is the impossible position of the Palestinians. For many Europeans, just recognizing the Palestinian right of self-determination and being able to speak out already implies a degree of antisemitism or 'Israel denial'. This leads to absurd situations in which you can be accused of antisemitism in Europe if you use the term *Nakba* to describe the mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948, let alone if you criticise Zionism or Israeli apartheid. Combating antisemitism, Weizman argued, crosses over into anti-Palestinian racism when it involves directly attacking and denying Palestinian identity and history.

The *Framer Framed* symposium gave the participants of *Documenta 15* the opportunity to discuss their experiences as targets of the most lengthy and extensive 'new antisemitism' campaign in German history. In doing so, it offered deep insight into the artistic contributions of the participants, an understanding of how such campaigns work, and reflections on the damage done to informed public debate. Unfortunately, this kind of space for deliberation and reflection is the exception rather than the rule in Europe, where institutions and media should surely see it as their responsibility to inform the public.

## **An indefensible politics**

To break the deadlock, it is vital that European institutions and the politicians that represent them stop portraying themselves and their nations as mere bystanders to 'a conflict', and instead acknowledge their part in creating the situation, whether through British colonial rule in Palestine, through the historical persecution of Jews culminating in the Holocaust, or colonial politics in North Africa and the Middle East.

The Holocaust led many to see the foundation of a self-ruling Jewish state as the only option. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt showed that the European process of nation-state formation and its dissemination during colonial times had led to statelessness and refugee status for many. The foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the expulsion of the Palestinians was, according to Arendt, an intrinsic part of this process. If we follow her logic, Europe bears responsibility not only for the persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust, but also for what happened to Middle Eastern Jews at the onset of decolonization and for directing Jewish mass migration to Israel from the Mediterranean - in short, for the huge ripple effects of Europe's colonial power that has brought about modern-day Israel/Palestine.

By recognizing this responsibility, the history (and criticism) of the colonial state of Israel can be integrated into a broader understanding of exactly how the situation between Jews and Palestinians in Israel has come about. Accepting historical responsibility could thereby contribute to countering criticism of Israel motivated by antisemitism and/or [geo]political agendas, while at the same time acknowledging the reality of apartheid and even worse political and human disasters. This sort of historical accountability could contribute significantly to a political commitment to a structural transformation, respecting the circumstances of *all* the involved people.



We should therefore avoid dismissing criticism of Israel as antisemitic and ‘dangerous’ while ignoring European involvement. This not only makes the Palestinian position more hopeless and desperate, but also erodes the concept of antisemitism morally and politically, by rendering it an instrument for defending the indefensible. Voices that place the perspectives of *all* those involved in a historical context are crucial, as are those that articulate decolonising perspectives: an end to apartheid and generating conditions for coexistence within a political framework that respects the principle of equality. Allowing these voices to participate in the public debate is in the best interests of all, except those who twist the notion of antisemitism to further their own agendas and ethnocratic politics.

In addition to the historical perspective, a broader critique of contemporary European involvement is needed, one that analyses not only why, but also how it remains business as usual in the EU to unconditionally support Israel. For example, there is Israel’s involvement in the EU’s ambitious *Horizon Europe* programme (total budget 95.5 billion euros), which was renewed in 2021. The programme is aimed at collaborations within Europe in industry, culture and academia. Several countries neighbouring on the EU, including Israel, are participants. The agreement was signed by the government of Naftali Bennett, the leader of a party that promotes Jewish settlement in the West Bank. A European condition for this cooperation with Israel was that there would be no investment in Israeli projects and universities in the occupied Palestinian territories.

But how meaningful was that condition under the Bennett government, not to mention the current one? A more critical attitude would argue that the EU is acting like an economic empire and, despite all its fine moral and political rhetoric, is mainly serving its own economic goals. Europe demands an ineffective concession (no investment in the occupied territories) but ultimately legitimizes Israel. It is crystal clear that in practice all Jewish Israelis – including those in the occupied territories – benefit from EU money, certainly under the current government.

If there can be said to be any positive side to the open racism and rightwing extremism of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, it is that this European approach becomes difficult to maintain. The more extreme the Israeli government becomes, and the more settlement, expulsions, apartheid and persecution become official policies, the harder the EU must work to maintain the status quo – until it proves unsustainable. Our task as Europeans is to de-normalize and criticize apartheid, but even more to identify and further investigate European (and western) complicity with Israeli diplomatic rejectionism and its role in creating and maintaining the unacceptable realities generated by the denial of Palestinian rights. All in all, a commitment to this is the very least required given Europe’s historical responsibility.

And yet those Jews and Palestinians who work together for equal rights in Israel/Palestine are accused of antisemitism. Right now, it is more urgent than ever to shift the focus from the rhetoric surrounding antisemitism to the *de facto* annexation of the occupied territories, the existing legal inequalities within Israel, and the plans of the current government. Even under these extreme circumstances, the question is whether the international community has the power to stop Israel from pursuing its most extremist and destructive fantasies and set it on another, entirely different path.



## Afterword

Despite the massive investments, tangible results of anti-antisemitism campaigns are nowhere to be found. A few years ago, as we mentioned in the article, in the Netherlands, a National Coordinator for Combatting Antisemitism was created as a new agency that fell under the Criminal Justice and Security Department with a half-million Euro budget (increased to 1.5 million in 2024). It was split from the coordinator for combatting racism, which was (and still is) located under the Department for Internal Affairs. More recently, 'antisemitism task forces' were installed in US campuses in response to waves of pro-Palestinian student protests, while McCarthyite Congress hearings have led to the ousting of three Ivy-League university presidents. The deployment of ever-increasing resources does not reduce polarization, as it is claimed. In fact, it embodies it.

The irony is that bureaucracies that are the very antithesis of cultural change are tasked with bringing it about. Those who see antisemitism as nothing but a propaganda tool of the state of Israel reject any engagement with these apparatuses. Especially in the aftermath of 7 October, the language used for anti-antisemitism – terms like 'zero-tolerance', 'combat', 'taskforces' – is one of belligerence and securitization. Antisemitism has become 'weaponised' in a war in which stakeholders make little distinction between what goes on in secure settings like university campuses, cultural institutions and museums, and real war zones where bodies pile up and mass atrocities are perpetrated. These radically parallel realities are constantly brought together by propaganda. That forces us to centre our attention on Europe not as a separate issue but as a critical arena of contention, having everything to do with antisemitism *and* the current deep crisis in Israel/Palestine.

The French president Emmanuel Macron's description of October 7 as the 'biggest antisemitic massacre of our century' at a ceremony paying tribute to the French victims underscores how and why Europe is standing with Israel. The statement apparently took its lead from Netanyahu's claim that Hamas are 'the new Nazis', made in response to the International Court of Justice ruling on 26 January. In suggesting that Hamas' main motive is antisemitism, Macron, like Netanyahu, expressed a belief that his citizens were attacked as Jews. This alludes to a dominant perception of Israel, propagated by the far-right, as a frontier of Europe's civilizational war. The role of antisemitism in the hideous crimes committed by Hamas has not been investigated; yet the connection between Hamas, Islam and antisemitism, propagated by Israeli *hasbara*, is a forgone conclusion.

For us, this begs a return to context. Historically, European antisemitism was characterised by a paranoid scapegoat structure targeting a European minority. That is not the same as anticolonial hatred unleashed against an occupier. Leaving aside the reverberations of historical European antisemitism and contemporary Islamophobia, Macron's statement was primarily a media stunt meant to satisfy specific sensibilities. Because antisemitism alarmism is enthusiastically propagated by rightwing and far-right media in France, just like in the Netherlands, the political mainstream must show to the Jewish minority that it is also strong on the issue to reassure Jewish voters considering voting for Le Pen.



European politics has developed a kind of a 'need' for anti-antisemitism as a litmus test for how 'tough' it is on its own migrant populations and decolonial critics, especially when they are Muslims or Palestinians – or critical Jews, for that matter. Because anti-antisemitism has proved so useful in this respect, we can be sure that nothing will stop it any time soon. All over Europe, critics of Israel are often now accused of creating an unsafe environment for Jews. The targets can even be the winner of the Hannah Arendt Prize, such as writers Masha Gessen or Adania Shibli – and there are many other examples, particularly in Germany, but by no means only there. However crude, anti-intellectual and false such understandings of antisemitism are – going far beyond anything that the IHRA working definition has already legitimated – they give rightwing organisations a moral standing. They also camouflage the moral bankruptcy of European support for Israel.

The detrimental effects of the current antisemitism debate are that Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices are heavily censored, that European publics have no constructive understanding of antisemitism, and that racist antisemitism is left unaddressed. An even more disconcerting effect is that the 'bystander' politics of the European Union and European countries is transformed into a more unapologetic colonial politics, which is not only destructive but also contributes to the further deterioration of the situation in Israel/Palestine. This politics has become increasingly transparent for what it is, which could partly explain why, in the context of the Gaza war, many more people feel freer to join the global movement of justice for Palestine.

Cultivating habits of doubt, self-critique and attention for complexity and context are necessary antidotes to this pitiful state of affairs. Explicit resistance to Europe's formidable complicity with the Palestinians' oppression and its self-serving stance on Israel/Palestine, on the basis of the values of social justice, freedom and equality, are the order of the day. Standing firmly in defence of Palestinian rights, our specific contribution as scholars and educators in Europe should be in bringing forth constructive ambiguities, promoting informed debates, and making alliances possible in these polarizing, dark, and difficult times.

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## **Footnotes**

1. In conversation with the authors.

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