

Experiencing European Anti-Americanism and Anti-Israelism

An Interview with Jeffrey Gedmin

- Four factors play a role in the increasingly anti-Israeli sentiment in Europe: the attempt to assuage guilt over Europe's murderous past, rivalry with the United States, anti-Semitism, and the rejection of European concepts of society by the majority of Israelis.
- Israel has long been a bone of contention between America and Europe. Many Europeans perceive Israel as an ally, partner, outpost, client, or satellite of the United States. While it may not be the driving force, Israel's connection to the United States is an important factor in the European- Israeli relationship.
- Denial and appeasement are major characteristics of European political discourse. Many Europeans are "tone-deaf" to their own general bias, if not hostility, to the democratic state of Israel.

A Widening Disagreement

Jeffrey Gedmin, an American, is director of the Aspen Institute in Berlin. According to Gedmin, four factors play a role in Europe's increasingly anti-Israeli sentiment: Europe's attempt to assuage guilt over its murderous past, rivalry with the United States, anti-Semitism, and the nonacceptance of European concepts of society by the majority of Israelis.

Gedmin forecasts that with the greater divergence in views between the United States and Europe, the disagreement over Israel will increasingly widen. He says, "During the forty years of the Cold War, we Americans had a close relationship with Europe, even if it was not without problems. After the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989, Europe, and in particular Germany, gradually woke up, thinking that they needed America less. Thus began a path to greater competition and rivalry, some of it benign, some less so.

"Dependency on America during the Cold War has bred terrible European resentment. Americans have underestimated how deep that runs. Yet the imbalance in power between the United States and Europe remains and this breeds even more European frustration and envy. Europe is still lacking in economic growth and dynamism, self-confidence and demography."

Anti-Semitic Hate Mail

Gedmin considers that since 2002 it has been simultaneously the most interesting as well as the worst time to be an American in Berlin. He expressed public support for the war in Iraq in German newspaper columns and in television interviews. In a methodological approach to assessing today's confused situation, Gedmin believes that vignettes often illuminate it best. They put key issues more in focus than detailed analysis might do.

"As a Catholic I was struck by the amount of virulently anti-Semitic hate letters and email I received. There were many dozens of items. I was called a 'Jewish war criminal,' a 'Jewish pornographer.' Pardon my language, but more than once, these texts stated that I was a 'Jew fucker' or 'a son of a whore, who should be covered with napalm.'

"During the last two years in Berlin I was publicly insulted, heckled, and refused service in a restaurant because I supported the war to remove Saddam Hussein. Once I was sitting on a bench in Berlin, in front of the famous Adlon Hotel. Three young men recognized me as someone who supported this war, and heckled me from a distance. They were nicely dressed twenty-something youngsters in polo shirts, not skinheads. They said, 'You're not wanted here. You don't belong here. Why don't you get out of this country?' It made a deep impression on me.

"The debate about Iraq in Europe generally and in Germany specifically struck me. The German chancellor said that even if the United States acts multilaterally or with a UN mandate, Germany will not participate in the war. One socialist minister in his cabinet, Justice Minister Herta Daeubler-Gmelin, compared George W. Bush to Adolf Hitler. A leading Social Democratic parliamentarian compared the American ambassador in Berlin to a Soviet one. Two German ministers marched in the streets calling the Americans war criminals and chanting 'no blood for oil.'

"A senior Foreign Ministry official claimed that America was becoming a police state at home. Another accused us of imposing a Brezhnev doctrine on the European Union. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said that Germans were tired of being a satellite of the United States. All this before we had made any decision about what to do in Iraq.

"I remember passing the American embassy on Unter den Linden and seeing a sign hanging out there for weeks from protesters, which read: 'Mr. Bush, remember Nueremberg. Death by hanging.' It leaves me to believe that part of this debate about Iraq - and maybe much of it - had to do more with containing the United States than with whether Saddam Hussein should be removed."

Israel, a Bone of Contention

"Israel has long been a bone of contention between America and Europe. Many Europeans perceive it as an ally, partner, outpost, client, or satellite of the United States. Even if in the relationship between Europe and Israel the latter's connection to the United States is not the driving force, it is very important.

"Perhaps the most crucial element in Europe's increasingly hostile attitude toward Israel is the continent's history. Each time a European editor, intellectual, or politician points out that Palestinians are victims and Israelis are belligerent aggressors, these Europeans unburden themselves of their past. In their discriminatory attitude toward Israel, the pathological-psychological elements dominate the ideological one. On top of that, there is much plain anti-Semitism among Europeans, as my experience as a non-Jew proves.

"Yet another important anti-Israeli force derives from the fact that Europeans think they have created a Dream Project in the form of the European Union, built on rules, regulations, and citizen power. They try desperately to export this make-believe model to Israel, which, for logical reasons, is not accepted by the majority of Israelis. That frustrates these Europeans endlessly. They then look at Israel and say, 'You don't play along with our model. You are still willing to break rules when they don't fit your reality.' It causes a short circuit in many European brains."

Denial: A Characteristic of European Discourse

Gedmin adds, "In conversations, Europeans often give me similar diplomatic, sterile, postnational, postmodern, very 'EUish' views of the Middle East. They say that Israel has the Palestinian problem wrong. It should rely less on force and invest more in dialogue with the Palestinian leadership. Then the Palestinians could get what they want: dignity and land. Israel would also get what it wants: peace. After all, the Europeans claim, violence begets violence and creates a cycle of violence.

"Denial and appeasement are major characteristics of European political discourse," says Gedmin. In his role he meets many people from diverse backgrounds and has much anecdotal material to relate.

"In one conversation with a very distinguished German professor, I made what I thought was a harmless remark, saying, 'It is true in general that we Americans tend to be pro-Israeli, and many Europeans tend to be pro-Palestinian.' My conversation partner was enraged, asking how I could possibly think this? She claimed such a notion was preposterous. Europe in general, because of its past - and Germany in particular - has a special obligation to the state of Israel and is fulfilling that. She also thought the suggestion that any part of the German political landscape or intelligentsia could be anti-Israeli was outrageous.

"However reputable she may be, this person is intellectually dishonest and in deep denial when she picks up the newspapers, watches television coverage, and listens to debates. She is 'tone-deaf' to the general bias, if not hostility, to the democratic state of Israel."

Anti-Israel Bias

Gedmin illustrates how obvious this anti-Israeli bias often is. "Not so long ago there was a story on the front page of a prominent German mainstream newspaper, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. Above the fold, in color, was a photograph of an elderly gentleman with tears running down his face. Any human being would look at that gentleman and feel some empathy. The caption of the story said that he was a Palestinian farmer and Israeli defense forces had just razed his grapefruit field.

"This was immediately after a lethal Palestinian suicide bombing against Israeli civilians. This event was covered on page six of the same issue, without a photograph, in a brief text. The article on the destroyed grapefruit field on page one was much larger than the one on page six about the murderous Palestinian suicide bombing."

Gedmin says he could offer many more examples. "In 2002, I gave a speech on Iraq before a business group in Frankfurt. Afterwards, during the coffee break, a German international businessman came up to me, talking about Iraq in a very friendly, warm, casual sort of way. Then he said, 'Can I ask you one question about American policy toward Iraq?' I replied, 'Sure, ask anything.' And in the public space with several people standing around, he asked, 'It is the Jews, isn't it?' I said, 'What do you mean?' He explained, 'It is the Jews in the United States who are driving the entire Iraq campaign, is it not?' I was shocked that this could happen in public in 21st-century Germany.

"There is also a major problem in fighting the disease of moral equivalence in Europe. After each new Palestinian suicide bombing, many people say to me no matter what blood is spilled, 'There are two sides to this conflict.' This reminds me of the Cold War when there were also two sides to the conflict. The United States and the West made mistakes. That did not make the West morally equal to the Soviet Union.

"One lesson of the Camp David II negotiations was that the Palestinian side did not want peace, let alone intend to deliver it. That is not a lesson that is drawn in Europe, where one can read ad nauseam complex articles focusing on Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's mistakes."

America and Europe: More of the Same

"In discussions about Europe and America one often finds similar attitudes of denying, playing down, or marginalizing the obvious. I usually say that 'we Americans have double standards, while Europeans have none.' The United States has political cooperation with dictatorships such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Yet we debate the resulting problems openly; ask ourselves how far our tactics should lead us and what the alternatives are.

"When the German chancellor goes to Riyadh, he is accompanied by the heads of major German companies, does business and leaves. Terrorism, human rights abuses, or anti-Semitism are not mentioned in these visits. Although we also do business heavily, and sometimes wrongly, in America public debate accompanies the issue."

Gedmin adds that the extreme totalitarian aspects of the Arab world usually do not resonate in his conversations in Germany, even though these should remind the Germans of their own totalitarian past. "Often when I talk to Germans about the lack of democracy in the Arab world, the reaction is, 'Why are you so pro-Israeli? You aren't even Jewish.' I answer that my position is an easy one because both Israel and the United States are democracies. In addition, the U.S. needs allies and Israel is one. That is a simpler answer than basing one's relationship on history and responsibility for Second World War crimes."

Agnosticism and Neutrality toward Democracy

Gedmin mentions that he has difficulty understanding the prevailing European attitude toward democracy. "West Europeans did adopt or readopt democracy after the Second World War, yet now one encounters a strange agnosticism and neutrality. Europeans, though opinions are not monolithic, are democrats as they value elections, the free press, and the opportunity to go on vacation. At the same time they are indifferent to the fate of others, and rationalize it by saying that these are Chinese or Arabs.

"Many Europeans close their eyes to what happened in Iraq. They do not even say, 'We do not necessarily agree with American policy to remove Saddam Hussein, yet it was a terrible, vicious, wicked, totalitarian system that treated the country's population in the most criminal of fashions.'

"Before the Iraq War, tens of thousands of Germans took to the streets in Berlin with candles to protest against it, among them, church leaders, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens. After the United States removed Saddam Hussein from power, close to one hundred mass graves were discovered in Iraq. When this became known there were no candles in German churches, no discussion on television talk shows. This does not mean that people are disinterested or in favor of mass murder, but it doesn't engender passion. There is a blind eye about terrible tyrannies, many of which are Arab. Simultaneously, there is a deaf ear about Israel being the lone Middle Eastern democracy, a beacon of light in the heart of a dark area."

European Passion and Lack of It

When asked why the Palestinian issue engenders passion, Gedmin replies, "It is very 'helpful' for a certain ideology in European political culture to see the Palestinians as helpless underdogs being repressed by the Israelis. This thesis enables many Europeans to relativize, or even balance, Europe's guilt. A second factor is that in Europe, romanticism about underdogs still prevails.

"This reflects further European hypocrisy. There is no passion in either Germany or Europe for independent Kurdish or Basque states. There is no concern for Tibetan underdogs. One can only conclude that the reasons Europeans consider the Palestinian cause for independence central are their cultural bias, burdens of the past, and anti-Semitic feelings. It would be much more logical to see the Israelis as underdogs, a small democracy in a large, hostile Arab environment.

"European countries adhere to the convention on prevention and punishment of genocide. Unlike the UN Declaration on Human Rights, this is a treaty with force of law. The first article reads that the highest obligation of the signatory states is to 'prevent and punish genocide as a crime under international law.' The treaty spells out specifically what genocide is: 'killing . . . with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.' All this fits Hamas both in word and in deed. Israel's right to defend itself is overwhelming.

"In Europe the number of people who make that case is small, and the Israeli cause against Hamas is not very popular. European leaders are not likely to say that if Israel defends itself and aggressively goes after Hamas leaders, 'This is not only a case that is overwhelmingly moral, but it's also legal.'"

Gedmin tells another anecdote. "I stood near the Brandenburg Gate watching a demonstration in the run-up to the Iraq War. Among the participants were several German teenagers carrying big Palestinian flags. The demonstration was against the United States removing Saddam Hussein, a terrible tyrant, from power in Iraq. I asked myself, 'If you are sixteen and live in Berlin, have you ever been to a Palestinian home, or in Israel, or the Middle East? Probably not. And where do you buy such a big demonstrative flag? I would not even know where to go.'

"What is the psychology of this phenomenon and how is it linked to the United States and Iraq? Where did these youngsters pick this up? They breathe in this passion from television, their teachers or parents. Theirs are not only anti-Israeli or pro-Palestinian feelings. In the most fundamental sense, these are anti-Western sentiments. These teenagers have made themselves accomplices of one of the world's most beastly dictatorships. They wrap themselves in symbols, colors, and flavors that go with the pro-Saddam camp. This is a warped identity that could be defined as, 'I am sixteen, drink

beer, eat ice cream, want to protect Saddam Hussein, and sympathize with Palestinian terror against Israeli civilians."

The Characteristics of Sickness

Gedmin refers to the future. "I do not think that German or European democracies are crumbling. Europe is not dying. Yet to some extent it is sick. This does not yet express itself in stark terms, such as the sky falling, NATO's closing, or the United States withdrawing from Europe.

"The characteristics of the sickness develop gradually. I cannot quantifiably prove that insidious phenomena such as anti-Americanism, anti-Israeli sentiment, and anti-Semitism have spread, compared to twenty-five years ago in the heart of the Cold War debate. Yet two observations spring to mind. Then these were fringe phenomena while now they are more fashionable and mainstream. The second is that these sentiments are no longer the monopoly of any particular part of the political spectrum. They are there on the European Left, Right, and in the center.

"In April 2004 the chairman of the Springer publishing house, Matthias Doepfner, wrote an article in the daily *Die Welt*. There he condemned the popularity - not only on the Left but also in Center-Right circles - of openly disliking and disparaging the United States and Israel. His was an honest voice."

Analyzing Elegant Dinner Parties

"Why has it become so acceptable that - at elegant dinner parties - very distinguished people openly say, 'I'm not anti-American, but Bush disgusts me and makes me physically sick? He is a war criminal and a real threat to world peace.' I can only interpret such statements as being partly about Bush and partly about using him as an acceptable cover to bash America.

"One can similarly interpret texts such as, 'I despise Sharon, he is a war criminal.' It reflects partly what some people think about Sharon and at the same time it gives them a justifiable cover to express what they truly think, 'Damn the Israelis and Jews, they disgust me.'"

Gedmin suggests that one can almost draw a model of the typical dinner conversation on these subjects in Berlin. "The number of diners is about twelve. Around eight are very angry at me and say, 'You are just wrong.' Some will say condescendingly and patronizingly, 'I'm sorry you feel like that because you have not been nicely treated here and you are a good person.' They add, 'But most Americans, Jews, and Israelis here are completely happy, you must really have been at the bad end of things.'

"Usually at such a dinner a minority of two or three people remain silent. After the dinner they approach me or call me up the next day and say something like, 'Thank God you expressed your opinion, you are absolutely right. We have been thinking what you said the whole time.' I usually reply, 'Where were you at the dinner last night? I would have liked your voice in the conversation.' They rationalize their answer, saying, 'Well, I know, but you made the points so well.'

"Sometimes people even say to me, 'Many more believe in what you said than you think.' I reply, 'Where are they? Let them come out of the closet and join the party.' They remain silent because they are cowards, and they want to be liked and to see what the group thinks. To be in the minority is unpopular. What I do, speaking up for America, or Israel, however, does not require courage such as being a member of the American military in Iraq does, or of the Israeli defense forces fighting terrorism."

Europe's Counteridentity

"The Europe of today is characterized not only by its territorial expansion through adding new member states and the development of its common currency. It is also characterized by its emancipation from America and the reflex to define itself in opposition to it.

"Europe does not define itself also in contrast to Israel, yet it refuses to think maturely and strategically about how to produce a genuine peace in the Middle East. The typical European approach to Israel is to wait until Israel reacts to an attack and then criticize it. The Israeli government states that it is important to clean out terrorists from Jenin. The Europeans react by calling it a 'catastrophe' or a 'massacre.' Then Israel decides that an alternative approach to stopping terror is killing the leaders of the Palestinian terrorist groups. Europeans then react by saying, 'That is against international law.' Thus the Israeli government decides it is more peaceful and civil to build a fence to cordon off the terrorists. Then the Europeans say that is not a good idea.

"One would expect the Europeans to say at least once, 'This is what we would do. Our proposal is credible for a number of sound reasons. We will support it in the following ways. If you accept it and it fails, we will protect you by taking a number of major actions.' On that front, however, the Europeans are totally absent."

Muslims in Europe

When asked whether radical Islam and the many unintegrated European Muslims will not undermine the European dream, Gedmin answers, "The conflict is not only between the West and radical Islam. A parallel battle will be fought out partly on European soil between Islamists and Muslim moderates. Large parts of the European Muslim

population are not assimilated. Europeans have for many years turned a blind eye to that.

"Americans are not different from the Europeans in this tendency. For a long time, we have closed our eyes to what happens in Saudi Arabia. We pumped oil and hoped for the best. Now we realize that this does not work. The same will happen to Europe. There is a major incompatibility between the peaceful European Union dream and its large marginalized Muslim communities, which are being radicalized. Furthermore, the Muslims are growing in numbers while European indigenous populations are shrinking. Europe is only starting to try and come to terms with the European Muslim problem, which will grow over the years.

"In the meantime, Europe feeds the impulse of appeasement, which one sees in both Germany and France as well as in other EU countries such as Spain. The authorities fear that if one confronts an Arab rogue state, or an Islamic terrorist, this might incite a reaction within radical Muslim circles in their own countries."

Appeasement Invites Aggression

"So far with every Westerner beheaded in Iraq, with every Israeli teenager murdered by a Palestinian, there is a reflex reaction among important circles in Europe to say that, 'It is the fault of the victim. If only the Americans had not removed Saddam Hussein, and if only the Israelis would give the Palestinians land, this would not have happened.'"

Gedmin adds that Americans have learned the hard way that appeasement invites aggression. Most Europeans still have to learn that. Many important circles in Europe believe that it was Germany's policy of *détente* that 'hollowed out' communism. Therefore in their view of history, Reagan's and Thatcher's policies might have turned the political situation with the Soviet Union into a disaster. It was fortunate that Communism crumbled and they are willing to admit that the American and UK roles in that were even somewhat constructive. He sees that narrative rather differently.

"The Spanish reaction after the Madrid mass murder of train passengers in March 2004 is an extreme case of European appeasement policy."

Gedmin has pondered what would happen if Europe were subjected to a major terrorist attack. "It could break either way. It could stiffen Europe, or many people might blame the United States and Israel. Europe has a split personality and I do not know which one would dominate in such a case."

Confronting the Challenges

"Liberal democracies face a huge fight against the lethal phenomenon of Arab and Muslim terrorism. When this becomes clearer to European populations, they may start to understand that this battle will not be easily won. Many Americans recognize the threat terrorist forces represent, while many Europeans underestimate both the danger and their own unhealthy part in dealing with it.

"To counter this requires endless, tireless work of building networks, arguing, and making information available. Through such networks we can provide moral and intellectual solidarity to those in Germany who are pro-American and pro-Israeli. Those who write articles have to be encouraged to speak up. When the Bush administration pursues the right foreign policy, while selling it poorly, private institutions and individuals have to come to their assistance to explain it. The same is true for Israel."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

A slightly extended version of this interview will be part of Manfred Gerstenfeld's forthcoming book, provisionally titled *Israel & Europe: An Expanding Abyss*

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