

Punishing Antisemitism

by Michael Curtis

What singular disgraceful theme unites advocates of the far right, the far left, and Islamic fundamentalists? In spite of the different ideologies and priorities of these groups, all share attitudes of intolerance, prejudice and hatred towards Jews, this unique combination of religion, race, and people. What's in a name? That which we call antisemitism by any other name would stink as foul.

The increase in the extent of antisemitism in European countries is disturbing, particularly in Britain. According to the British Community Security Trust (CST) 924 antisemitic incidents were recorded in 2015, the third highest ever recorded. There was no particular event that led to the increase. Two thirds of the incidents were in London and Manchester. In first six months of 2016, 557 antisemitic incidents were recorded, a quarter of them on social media.

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, British Metropolitan Police Commissioner, confessed he was amazed at the "shocking" level of abuse revealed by social media directed against Jews and other minority communities. He was surprised by the abuse Jewish people received, and social media was now allowing the problems of hate-fuelled abuse to be revealed to a wider audience. He urged, "we must stop it whether it's motivated by hate, greed, or violence. "

Definition of the virus of antisemitism has been notoriously troublesome and controversial. There is now general recognition that to address the problem, there should be clarity about what it actually is.

The European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in 2005 presented a definition that was offered to provide a guide to EU member states. It was accepted by many

but was not appreciated by some groups and individuals because of what they considered vague language or more likely because of different political sympathies. That EUMC definition was adopted for a time by the European Union published a fact sheet, on antisemitism.

The most recent official international statement comes from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an organization of 31 countries, 24 of which are EU member countries, at a meeting in Bucharest on May 26, 2016. Its aim is to provide a working definition of antisemitism in order to fight against it through coordinated international political action. It said it was setting an example of responsible conduct for other international bodies. Prominent in this conduct would be a focus on education, research, and remembrance of the Holocaust.

The main point of the IHRA definition is that "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 realistically deals with the discriminatory manifestations targeting the state of Israel, conceived as a collectivity, as well as Jews in general. Antisemitism would therefore include a number of references to Jews. One is accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel or to priorities of Jews world wide than to the interests of their own country. A second is denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination and calling Israel a racist state.

A third is applying double standards regarding Jewish or Israeli behavior not expected or demanded of other peoples or nations. This would include BDS and the EU labelling of goods from West Bank and Golan Heights as they are only applied

against Israel. However, criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitism.

The definition would also apply to using symbols and images of classical antisemitism, such as blood libel, to relate to Israel or Israeli citizens. It would include comparing actions of Israel with Nazi Germany, or accusing the Jews as a people or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust, or holding Jews collectively responsible for the actions of Israel.

It is a sign of hope and possible change that the important IHRA definition is being accepted by European countries. The first is the British government whose Prime Minister Theresa May announced in a major speech on December 12, 2016 she would adopt the IHRA definition so that Britain would punish discriminatory or prejudiced behavior. The Prime Minister defined antisemitism as in essence language or behavior that displays hatred towards Jews simply because they are Jews. The British decision is legally binding and official authorities can use it and act on it to punish offenders. She added that criticising the government of Israel can never be an excuse for hatred against the Jewish people.

May outlined three factors underlying the basis of policy. Defeating antisemitism means punishing those responsible for it. The Jewish people must be kept safe. People must be educated to fight hatred and prejudice in all its forms.

May has acted. Conscious that about one quarter of all antisemitic incidents involved social media, she brought together Internet companies to deal with the poisonous propaganda found on that media. She committed £13 million to support security at Jewish faith schools, synagogues, and communal buildings. She regards the BDS movement as wrong and unacceptable. Unlike the British Labour party, the Conservative party and government will have no truck with

those who subscribe to that movement.

The Prime Minister praised both British Jewry and the State of Israel. She, and Home Secretary Amber Rudd spoke of the contribution of Jews to British life: without its Jews, Britain would not be Britain. May complimented the country of Israel, exactly the size of Wales, as a country where people of all religions and sexualities are free and equal in the eyes of the law, a remarkable country and a beacon of tolerance.

Penalties for antisemitism have been imposed. Home secretary, Amber Rudd, announced that the far right party, National Action, that she described as a racist, antisemitic and homophobic organization, is to be banned under British laws on terrorism. One of the militants of National Action, whose hero is Adolf Hitler, a man named Garron Helm in October 2014 was sentenced to four weeks in prison for sending antisemitic messages to Jewish Member of Parliament Luciana Berger on Twitter. In June 2015, a 24 year old militant who wrote hate filled blogs was sentenced to a 2 years prison term..

Noticably, private British groups are helping to fill the gaps of official inaction. On December 15, 2016 a 52 year old singer named Alison Chabloz appeared in court accused of posting a grossly offensive video. The case was brought by the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism when the official Crown Prosecution Service refused to do so. Chabloz on the video performed an offensive song with lyrics that questioned the Holocaust. For her, Auschwitz is a "theme park just for fools, the gassing zone is a proven hoax." She speaks of the "myth of the Shoah gas chambers that is ruthlessly exploited by Israel to create further war and destruction."

At a moment when the British Labour party has disgraced itself by its tolerance of antisemites and Jewish lawmakers have received abusive messages and threats, it is welcoming that defining antisemitism correctly and punishing it has risen to importance in the British political agenda.