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### From the Jewish Question to the Palestinian Question

To begin with, as a contributor to the book *The Arab and Jewish Questions*,<sup>1</sup> I want to pay tribute to the two editors, Leila and Bashir. With this volume of essays, they have solved a conundrum that is almost as challenging as any Jewish or Arab question. Let me explain. In the background is a project in which all the contributors to the book took part: a series of workshops in Vienna under the auspices of the Bruno Kreisky Forum. Two themes animated the workshops: 'Arab engagements with the Jewish Question' and 'Jewish engagements with the Arab Question'. All of us were either Jewish or Arab – or both. So, without meaning to typecast anyone, you can imagine just how lively the conversations were. The conundrum is this: How do you capture the spirit of this project in the pages of a book? This is the puzzle that the editors have solved. The book is essentially performative: guided by the editors, the authors write in the spirit of mutual engagement. In a sense, this performance – this mutual engagement between Jew and Arab – is the answer that the book as a whole offers to the divisive questions it discusses, questions that precisely divide Arab from Jew, Jew from Arab, and Arab Jews from themselves.

Unsurprisingly, the conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine-Israel dominates the discussion in the book; unsurprisingly, because no subject is more divisive. The book does not argue for a particular political solution to the conflict but it does argue for a profound change of mood when approaching the question of the future: engaging in a common quest for the common good instead of engaging in hostilities. However, it is not possible to tackle the future unless we understand the present: how it was – and is – constituted by the past. All the chapters in the book bear upon this question.

My own essay approaches the question via an interrogation of an image or set of images: snapshots taken on 16 July 2017 at the Elysée Palace in Paris, when France's President Emmanuel Macron met Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: met and embraced. Had this been London, a demonstrative welcome by the head of state might have raised an eyebrow. But this was Paris, where it is probably normal for the president to clasp a visiting foreign dignitary to his bosom! Nonetheless, seen from a certain angle, the intimacy of their embrace takes on a meaning that transcends diplomacy. I interrogate their embrace in my essay. Seeing it as emblematic, I argue that it signifies what "the Jewish state" (represented by Netanyahu) means to "New Europe" (personified by Macron) and vice versa – not just on a warm summer's day in Paris but in the context of a complex relationship between Europe and the Jews, a relationship that extends over centuries. Hence the title of my chapter: 'An Emblematic Embrace'.<sup>2</sup> The upshot of the argument is this: the conflict in Israel-Palestine was made in (or by) Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh (eds), *The Arab and Jewish Questions: Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Full title: 'An Enigmatic Embrace: New Europe, the Jewish State, and the Palestinian Question'.

In this brief talk, I shall home in on one element in the overall argument: how the 'Jewish Question' in Europe turns into the 'Palestinian Question' in Israel.

The first thing to be said about 'the Jewish Question' is that it was not fundamentally a *Jewish* question: it was *Europe's* question about the Jews, a population that did not fit the European template. The second thing to say is that its roots lie in antiquity. We should not be misled by the *form* of the phrase, which might put us in mind of, say, the Irish Question or the Armenian Question or a host of other examples of what was called the National (or Nationalities) Question in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Jews were not just another case of a European nation whose future on the political map of modern Europe was the subject of a question. On the contrary, whether the Jews collectively *are* a nation in the modern (European) sense was moot: it was *part* of the Question. And, while this applied also to certain other groups, the question of the collective status of the Jews was radically different. "The Jewish question still exists," wrote Theodor Herzl in 1896. "It would be foolish to deny it. It is a remnant of the Middle Ages ..."<sup>3</sup> He had a point. The status of the Jews collectively was seen as problematic by Europe for a thousand years or more before the political formations that were the subject of the National Question in the nineteenth century came into being.

In short, the Jewish Question existed as an issue for Europe *avant la lettre*, and its thrust was altogether different. While the terms in which it was formulated changed from era to era, the Jews were singled out repeatedly as a special case, with a special role in Europe's sense of its own identity. Seen as being *in* Europe but not *of* Europe, they were the original 'internal Other', the alien Them to the European Us. First, Judaism, in antiquity, was the foil against which Europe defined itself as Christian. Later, in the eighteenth century, the Jews were (in Adam Sutcliffe's words) "the Enlightenment's primary unassimilable Other".<sup>4</sup> Then in the following century, this singling out of the Jews continued in the context of the rise of ethnically-defined states. Europe saw itself as a patchwork quilt of ethnic nationalities and the question arose: 'How do the Jews fit in? *Do* they fit in? If they do not, what is to be done with them or with their Jewishness?' The *National* Question was about ethnic difference and how Europe should deal with it. The *Jewish* Question was about the alien within, the original internal Other.<sup>5</sup>

The Palestinians have suffered twice over from Europe's othering of the Jews: first, under the dominion of the old Europe, then in the dispensation of the new. Let me try briefly to bring this double whammy into focus.

First, old Europe. There was a spectrum of proposed solutions to the Jewish Question. At one extreme, there was Herzl's political Zionism. (The subtitle for *The Jewish State*, his

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<sup>3</sup> *The Jewish State*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> It is significant that the Question was essentially about *European* Jewry, which was (and is) predominantly Ashkenazi. The status and treatment of Mizrachi Jews – mainly Jews from southern Asia and northern Africa – was an appendix to the Jewish Question, just as it was for Zionism; and for the same reason: both the Question and Zionism are quintessentially European phenomena. (Events in the Jewish world after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, plus the current demographics of the state, have affected the character of Zionism, but do not contradict the assertion that Zionism was planted and nurtured in European soil.)

seminal pamphlet, was 'An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question'.) At the other extreme was Hitler's 'final solution': extermination of the Jewish people. The two so-called solutions could hardly be more opposed. But in the 1940s there was, ironically, a kind of synergy between them. In May 1948, following close on the heels of Hitler's genocide of the Jews, the State of Israel came into existence: it came into existence on Palestinian soil. This is the first part of the double whammy: the price paid by Palestinians for Europe's othering of the Jews.

The second part is the result of Europe's determination to reinvent itself after the seismic upheavals of the earlier decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the carnage of the Second World War. "The European idea," said Romano Prodi, speaking as President of the European Commission in a landmark speech in 2004, "was based on the firm determination to make sure the Europe of the future would be different – a Europe of peace, tolerance and respect for human rights."<sup>6</sup> This is what I mean by 'New Europe'. And what has become of 'the Jewish Question', which was such a feature of Old Europe? Prodi, in the same speech, calls the Jews "the first, the oldest Europeans". He continues: "We, the new Europeans, are just starting to learn the complex art of living with multiple allegiances", whereas, he says, the Jews "have been forced to master this art since antiquity." "The rats are underneath the piles./The Jew is underneath the lot", wrote T S Eliot in 1920.<sup>7</sup> Now, suddenly we Jews are placed on a pedestal. "The rejection of anti-Semitism and the political integration of Jews into the Western world," writes Enzo Traverso, "did not lead to a dissolution of their alterity but, paradoxically, to its valorization."<sup>8</sup> That is to say, with the transition from Old Europe to New, Jews do not lose their otherness. Rather, their otherness is transposed into another key: admired model rather than despised foil. Such are the vicissitudes of European Jewish otherness.

And here's the rub. Inevitably, if subliminally, the Palestinians are cast as the negative to the Jewish positive. After their embrace at the Elysée Palace, Macron and Netanyahu spoke at the annual ceremony held at the site where the Winter Stadium used to stand, close to the Eiffel Tower. The ceremony commemorated the 75th anniversary of an infamous wartime episode in Vichy France: the roundup by French police on July 16, 1942 of thousands of Jews at the behest of the occupying Nazi authorities. In the course of his speech, Macron, who is a standard-bearer for the New Europe, confessed that antisemitism is not extinct in France: "the vile monster" he said, "is coming out of the shadows". Towards the end of his speech, he gave the monster a name: "anti-Zionism", which, he declared, "is a mere reinvention of anti-Semitism".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Romano Prodi, "A Union of Minorities," Seminar on Europe: Against Anti-Semitism, For a Union of Diversity, Brussels, February 19, 2004, available on the website of the European Commission at [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-04-85\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-04-85_en.htm). The event was jointly organized by the European Commission, the European Jewish Congress and the Congress of European Rabbis.

<sup>7</sup> 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar'.

<sup>8</sup> Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 56.

<sup>9</sup> The original French text for the speech reads: "l'antisionisme ... est la forme réinventée de l'antisémitisme": see <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique/>. "Mere" has been inserted in the official translation. This adds a certain emphasis but does not affect the basic sense of the statement. If anything, the definite article in "la forme" (not "une forme") strengthens the claim Macron is making. Literally: anti-Zionism "is the reinvented form of antisemitism."

In the old Europe, Jews paid the ultimate price for 'the Jewish Question' with the Shoah. As the Shoah led to the Nakba, the cost was transferred to the Palestinians. Now, with the New Europe, the Palestinians pay the price again. They pay twice over: once for Jews being the *stigmatised* Other and a second time for Jews being the *valorised* Other. First they pay the price for the antisemitic *exclusion* of Jews in Europe. Then they pay for their anti-antisemitic *inclusion*. The cloak of despised Other has settled firmly on the shoulders of the Palestinian in Israel's midst, like a hand-me-down. The 'Jewish Question' in Europe has turned into the 'Palestinian Question' in Israel. Such are the vicissitudes of European Jewish otherness..

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