



A Malevolent Pact: Israel and the European Far-Right

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Introduction

In the past, the European far-right had associations with historical events such as the Second World War, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. Surprisingly, today, the European far-right has shifted its stance and become a prominent advocate for the state of Israel. The relationship between Israel and European far-right movements has now reached its zenith.

Anti-Semitism, rooted in centuries of history, peaked in the Second World War with the horrific massacre of the Jewish people. The Nazi regime was not solely responsible for this massacre, although it was the main actor. For example, then British PM Winston Churchill's articles unearthed years later contained unpleasant statements about Jews (Majendie, 2007). France, under the Vichy regime, collaborated with the Nazis. In 1948, with the establishment of Israel and the immigration of Jews from various parts of the world, especially from European countries, Europe was relieved of the Jewish problem. More precisely, this "burden" was exported to the Palestinian lands.

On the other hand, in the post-war period, the European right wing had trouble sweeping its anti-

Semitic history under the carpet. Ironically, in the 2000s, a rapprochement emerged between the right-wing leadership in Israel and the European far right. Today, Israel's attacks on Gaza are enthusiastically supported by these groups.

The roots of this rapprochement that emerged in the 2000s, especially after the September 11th attacks, go back to the steps taken in the early 1990s. With the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of communism as a threat to Western hegemony, the selection of Islam as the new enemy was a process which Israel endorsed and benefited from in terms of gaining the support of key Western countries, especially the US.

Another important pillar of understanding the rapprochement between the European far right and Israel is to assess the ideological affinity between the two. Even though Israelis have closer genetic links with their Arab cousins than with the Europeans, white supremacy is a key tenet in this ideological alliance. Europe does not seem to have adequately learned the lessons of history. The process that led yesterday to the Holocaust is being repeated in the full view of the world.

New Enemy: Islam

" Hamas is ISIS " was one of the slogans used by the official channels of the Israeli state and by the highest state officials to justify Israel's war in Gaza. World politicians have also bought this analogy. Biden (2023) said on October 10th that " the brutality of Hamas — this bloodthirstiness — brings to mind the worst — the worst rampages of ISIS ."

Although Hamas is a political organisation that has been in control of Gaza since the 2006 Palestinian elections and has not carried out any actions outside Palestine and the occupied territories, it is understandable that Israel pragmatically draws an analogy between Hamas and ISIS, which has carried out bloody attacks in many countries to justify its aggression and gain the sympathy of world states. However, the reflex in developing this discourse did not emerge from simple pragmatic calculations. In fact, Israel has been trying to place " Islamic terrorism " at the centre of Western politics, especially in the US, since 9/11 and even since the 1980s. In other words, # HamasIsISIS was not invented on October 7th.

Since the mid-1970s, right-wing movements have dominated politics in Israel. This resurgence led to a public discourse in which Arabs and Muslims are demonised (Kumar, 2021). From the onset, trying to mask its settler colonial reality, Israel was trying to vilify acts of Palestinian resistance and make the label of terrorism against it stick on the world stage. In 1979, Benjamin Netanyahu, then head of the Jonathan Institute, organised a conference in Jerusalem where world leaders came together to discuss terrorism as a threat to the world (ibid.).

In the 1980s, there was a specific focus on a popular culture language that equated Muslims with terrorism and reinforced the images of Israel and the United States as heroes against terrorism. Israeli producers and production companies with Israeli partners also played a role in this move (ibid.).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of communist regimes, coupled with the massive increase in communication technologies, initiated the era of globalisation. However, in this context, Islam started to be perceived as the new global threat, especially in the US political discourse. We should also remember the intellectual work in this direction. The

ideas of scholars like Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis around the clash of civilisations contributed to this environment (Goedde, 2021). In this context, it should also be noted that Middle Eastern studies have become highly politicised (Dirks & Gilman, 2021).

With the September 11th attacks, the policy of " Islam as the new threat " was put into full play. The Bush administration used these internalised fears to push a hegemonic agenda to reshape the Middle East, clear a region with rich oil resources from competitors and expand the market economy's boundaries (Engerman, 2021).

Israel was actively putting " Islamic terrorism " on the US agenda (Kumar, 2021). Ahmad (2014) argues that the 2003 Iraq war began as a result of collaboration between some neocons in the American top leadership and Tel Aviv. According to this viewpoint, the quest to control oil resources was only partially driving the agenda behind the Iraq war. Pressure from Tel Aviv that wanted to reshape the region and eliminate obstacles to its hegemony, such as the threat of Saddam Hussein's regime, was the other part of the equation.

Mearsheimer and Walt (2006) took a broader reading and argued that US Middle East policy is too Israel-oriented to be explained by national interests and that the only plausible explanation for this situation is the activities of the Israel lobby. According to this perspective, factors such as the neocons in the top administration who have good relations with Israel, the lobby's influence on Congress due to the high donation rates of Jews even though their share in the total population is low, and its influence on the media is highly influential on US foreign policy.

Detractors, such as Noam Chomsky, opposed this view, fuelling more controversy. According to Chomsky, separating US interests from Israeli interests is inconceivable. Moreover, for him, the thesis that a minority group controls the US administration is not plausible. In this context, Chomsky (2015) describes Israel as a forward American base in the region.

Meanwhile, the Israel lobby was also active in Brussels, although less pervasive than in Washington. The European Coalition for Israel (ECI), led by Christian Zionists, has managed to develop relations with

different actors in European politics, which is much more diverse than the bipartisan politics of the US, in favour of Israeli interests. One of the most important concerns of the ECI is to ensure that Muslims are perceived as a threat (King, 2016). In this respect, the lobby's political discourse closely aligns with the European populist right.

Israel faced opposition from secular Arab nationalists in the 1960-1980s and subsequently from Islamist

decolonial movements. Although it had the support of the US for many years, it wanted to draw more attention to the Middle East. This agenda was active at least since the mid-70s. The politicised intellectual debates in the 1990s and, finally, the attacks on the US in 2001 provided the opportunity the Jewish state was looking for. However, Israel-EU relations were somewhat wobblier, and in Brussels, Israel did not find the same gung-ho support as in Washington. Under these circumstances, Israel needed to find partners in Europe.

Quid Pro Quo: Whitewashing Occupation & Holocaust

Since the early 2000s, European far-right politicians' interest in Israel has gradually increased. One of the first examples was the visit of Italian deputy PM Gianfranco Fini to Israel. Fini visited Israel nine years after he openly praised Mussolini in 1994. Since then, he made a series of moves signalling his support for Israel. The Israeli side welcomed his visit. Ariel Sharon called Italy "the closest friend we have in Europe" and continued: "Fini is a good and friendly leader". Fini's visit was seen as an attempt to clear the shadow of his party's racist past (Arie, 2003). Fini's strategic move was to be followed in the following years.

The Likud Party, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, has developed relations with right-wing populist movements in Austria, Sweden, Finland, Germany and many other countries based on the prediction that European populists are the continent's future. The words of the Israeli right-wing politician Eliezer Cohen were a clear expression of the Israeli right's hopes and predictions, which have not proved to be wrong over time: "They are talking the exact same language as Likud and others on the Israeli right. I'm too old for bullshitting -- we hope the right wing wins out in Europe." (Hawley, 2011). This partnership was based on a shared perception of the "Muslim threat".

However, this partnership should be considered not limited to anti-Muslim sentiments. Israel and the European right also functioned as each other's justifiers. The European right-wing polity was not free from its historical crimes. The negative memory of

the Nazi regime, the main perpetrator of the Second World War, and the Holocaust was an integral part of European identity. The Mussolini regime in Italy, the Franco regime in Spain and the French Vichy regime in collaboration with the Nazis had only taken place a few decades earlier. This memory was the main actor in developing the mentality of European states, Germany in particular, in the second half of the 20th century. Memory and remembering are particularly active in German political culture, with an impact on Europe, and are often used as a means of learning from the past of anti-Semitism and National Socialism. For example, the term *Erinnerungskultur*, which has an important place in German political culture, refers to a "culture of remembrance" and reflection on the lessons of the past. Within this political and cultural context, right-wing parties need to be whitewashed to increase their claims in mainstream politics and to get rid of the crimes they are labelled with. Developing good relations with Israel is a shortcut strategy.

On the other hand, Israel had not fully overcome the illegitimacy of its occupation on the world arena, which had been in effect since 1948. A significant number of European states, notably France, one of the two great powers of the EU, sought - unlike the US - to pursue a balanced policy between Arabs and Jews. Although Europe's influence on Middle East politics was limited compared to the US, for example, in the years following the 1967 war, with the 1973 Brussels declaration, 1977 London declaration and 1980 Venice declaration, the European Commission tried to pursue a balanced

policy. After the first Intifada, the EC supported UN Resolutions 605, 607 and 608, recognising Israel's illegal occupation (Lavoie, 2015).

France, under De Gaulle, wanted to develop good relations with the Arabs, imposing an arms embargo on the region after the 1967 war. Since Israel procured most of its weapons from France, it was the most negatively affected by this decision (Bass, 2010). The smuggling of Israeli boats built with German funds in Cherbourg, France, in 1969 despite De Gaulle's embargo underlined the difficulties in the relations (Rabinovich, 2019).

In this context, Israel's need for a better partner in Europe is also a response to the question of the legitimacy of its occupation policy. Despite all the manoeuvring, Israel did not reach the levels of international support it aspires to. Thus, investing in the European far-right seemed the next logical step.

As a result, the state of Israel, which has been pursuing a policy of occupation of Arab lands for several decades, found a close ally in the European right, the main actor of anti-Muslim sentiment, the main "other" in Europe. This unholy alliance was also beneficial for European right-wing parties to exonerate their past through their friendship with Israel.

The steps taken in this direction by the Front National, the famous French far-right party founded by Jean Marie Le Pen, are noteworthy. Jean Marie Le Pen was a leader who repeatedly made xenophobic remarks, including anti-Semitic ones. Perhaps the most notable of these were his praise of the Vichy regime and his statements denying the Holocaust. Even the Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders said about Le Pen: "My allies are not [France's Jean-Mari] Le Pen or [Austria's Jorg] Haider. We'll never join up with the fascists and Mussolinis of Italy. I am very afraid of being linked with the wrong rightist fascist groups" (BBC, 2010).



Marine Le Pen (L), president of the National Front, delivers a speech during a joint press conference with Geert Wilders (R), leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), in Brussels, Belgium on June 16, 2015. The National Front and the Dutch PVV party have formed a new far-right group in the European Parliament. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

But Marine Le Pen, the daughter of Jean Marie, took the reins of the party in 2011 and changed course. Since then, the party has become closer to Israel. Louis Aliot, a member of the FN top leadership who visited Israel that same year, said: "We do not always see eye-to-eye on Israel's foreign policy, but we have the same position on the dangers posed by radical Islam, which exists in Europe and also threatens Israel, which we call 'the western island,'" (Ettinger, 2011). The final bloc of the FN's transformation was done with the expulsion of the party's founder, Jean Marie Le Pen, after his controversial comments on the Holocaust (Al Jazeera, 2015). Some political commentators were sceptical of Marine Le Pen's ability to build an electoral base, arguing that Le Pen's re-orientation could undermine not only the FN's anti-semitism but also its place in French political culture (Gaffney, 2012). However, if one looks at Marine Le Pen's electoral record over the past decade, one can see that her party has become one of the strongest contenders. Analysts say Marine Le Pen could win the upcoming presidential elections.

Another leader who has steered his party away from anti-Semitism by sending warm messages to Israel is Italian Prime Minister Giorgio Meloni. Meloni, similar to Le Pen, not only conveys the party's top leadership's strong support for Israel and sends the message that they have learned from the memory of the Second World War but also cleans up the flaws within the party. In this context, he expelled one of the party's candidates for the 2022 elections for making remarks sympathetic to Hitler (Times of Israel, 2022). Another Italian far-right leader, Matteo Salvini, promised to move the Italian embassy to Jerusalem (Times of Israel, 2020). So far, only the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, and Kosovo have made such a decision.

Dutch politician Wilders is one step ahead of the others in this game. From the very beginning, he has been very pro-Israel. In the early years when he founded his party PVV, he was careful to distinguish himself from other far-right parties, describing Le Pen's FN as "blunt racist parties I do not care for" (Reuters, 2010). As time passes, however, the language of far-right parties becomes similar. They learn from each other's successes and routinely express their common solidarity. Wilders came together with parties he described as racist and formed a group in the European Parliament (Reuters, 2015). He congratulated Le Pen, who made it to the second round of the French presidential elections, saying, "A day of celebration for all Patriots in Europe."

Similarly, Le Pen's reaction to Wilders' victory in the Dutch elections in late 2023 was as follows: "Congratulations to @geertwilderspvv and the PVV for their spectacular performance in the legislative elections, which confirms the growing attachment to the defence of national identities," (Reuters, 2023).

Examples of both the rapprochement from the European far right to Israel and the winking eyes from Israel to the far right can be multiplied. For instance, Sebastian Kurz flew Israeli flags on Austrian government buildings during the Gaza attacks in 2021. However, it should not be forgotten that the European far-right still has limited power to shape European politics fully. Even though their votes are on the rise in many countries, many far-right groups are still on the fringe of mainstream politics. But it is important to remember that even where they are not in power, they have successfully influenced political discourse, and traditional right-wing parties have adopted their views.

For Israel, which continues its aggression against Gaza in full view of the world, capitalising on the European far right's success is the way forward. There are indications that the symbiosis between the two sides extends beyond the ideological and rhetorical realms. For example, Geert Wilders was reportedly funded by two pro-Israeli organisations from the US in 2010 and 2011 (Times of Israel, 2012). In 2016, it was revealed that Wilders was being investigated by the Dutch secret service for his ties to Israel (Paparlat, 2016).



Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz (L) meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem on April 23, 2014. (Israeli Government Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

White Supremacy

Yesterday's antisemites are today's biggest supporters of the Jewish state. Beyond reductionism, the Israeli state and the European far-right movements are ideologically aligned on a very fundamental point: White supremacy. In this context, the Jews' close kinship with their Semitic cousins, the Arabs, is an insignificant genetic detail. Because what is at stake is how history is constructed. In a context where Europe is being "cleansed" of Jews, Wilders summarises the situation as follows: "Our culture is based on Christianity, Judaism and humanism and (the Israelis) are fighting our fight," and continues: "If Jerusalem falls, Amsterdam and New York will be next." (Reuters, 2010).

It is also an intentional rewriting of history that denies the close historical ties between Islamic and European civilisations and the interactions that have contributed to each other's development. As part of the same history-writing, the European Coalition for Israel lobby emphasises that the only remedy against the Islamization of Europe is to remember its Judeo-Christian roots (King, 2016). However, there must also be concrete differences from which superiority emerges. Israel being the only democracy in the Middle East and respecting LGBT rights are two examples that are often emphasised in this regard. In other words, this alleged superiority is not only due to history. It is Israel's propaganda that claims that history has irrefutable consequences. The same applies to the propaganda of the European far right, which often uses the labels "immigrants who threaten women's rights", "Muslims who do not respect freedom of expression", and similar pejorative descriptions.

Israel's claims of democracy deserve scrutiny. Even though Israeli Arabs are second-class citizens, Israel continues to boast about being the only true democracy in the region, implying that it is part of the Western world. This tactic drew sympathy from the West for Israel. Paradoxically, the Arab Spring, which aims to restore democracy in the Arab World, has been one of the biggest sources of concern for Israel in the past decade (King, 2016). From the vantage point of Tel Aviv, it is much easier to deal with malleable and illegitimate dictators than dealing with legitimate representatives of the Arab people.

Furthermore, it is also important to recall that Israeli democracy has been built over decades on the denial of the right of return/citizenship to displaced Palestinians and settler colonialism that still displaces more and more people every day. Similarly, using gender issues to depict Israel as liberal and pinkwashing its exaction by using the LGBT movement while covering up its oppression of the Palestinians has been counterproductive. Many feminists reject this false equivalence (Zhang, 2023).

An equivalent concept to pinkwashing is homonationalism, which refers to the racialisation of homosexuality as a European national concept. In this discourse, Muslims are presented as a threat to sexual freedom. Judith Butler, famous for her work on homosexuality, rejected an award given to her by the LGBT community in Berlin with the following words: "I must distance myself from this complicity with racism, including anti-Muslim racism" (Sexual Politics Watch, 2010). Aside from the use of gender politics as a form of nationalism, far-right politicians have radically different approaches to this issue. Wilders, for example, is a prime example of homonationalism, followed by Marine le Pen in France (Adamson, 2017). However, other far-right parties have more conservative views on this issue.

This kind of politics is woven around the claim of supremacy. This claim of supremacy is also harmonised with today's dominant liberal discourses, and concrete examples of democracy, gender rights, and other issues are provided. However, as can be seen, there is no shared commonality. The only connecting threads between these heteroclitic movements are claims of superiority and the hatred directed at Muslims and immigrants. A similar observation can be said about Israel, which has neither ideological nor societal ideals to offer to the world beyond ethnic cleansing and genocide. Incidentally, far-right movements in many parts of the world covet this dark side. For them, Israel has become a role model for establishing racial hierarchies and supremacy over other races (Jegic, 2020).

What has been Learned from the Holocaust?

The memory of the Holocaust provides the backdrop for this entire political atmosphere. On the one hand, the legitimacy of Israel's occupation is based on it. On the other, the intellectual and political descendants of the perpetrators of the Holocaust are trying to show that their hands are clean as they aspire to regain power and re-build the grandeur of the past.

It is a great irony that the Holocaust is being used as a cover while tens of thousands of children, women and civilian men are being slaughtered in Gaza today, while the infrastructure is being destroyed and the historical heritage is being erased. It seems that the necessary lessons have not been learned.

It was wrong to diagnose the problem as anti-Semitism. If the problem had been coded as racism, supremacism and a homogenised nation-state, today's far-right parties would have had to separate themselves from these fundamental problems instead of separating themselves from anti-Semitism. When the same violence is directed against Muslims, these parties prefer to look the other way, condoning atrocities yet another time. If there was a general push-back, Israel would have more difficulty implementing its genocidal policies in Palestine. Now, even raising the voices of people displaced and murdered under the oppression of the Jewish state can be accused of anti-semitism. On the other hand, in Germany, for example, philosemitism, which is practised directly by the state, is nothing more than a political tool (Mishra, 2023).

Israel's relationship with the far right, in which it has invested, is based as much on mutual concrete interests as it is on shared values. Under changing circumstances, this relationship could be turned upside down, for example, if Israeli-induced instability leads to more migration or if US national interests can no longer support Israel. The balances are not easy for Israel. Exploiting the Holocaust legacy, as well as surfing over the wave of US national interests, has reached its limits.

The far-right is stronger than ever for the first time since the Second World War. By allying itself with this

resurgent movement and providing it with legitimacy, Israel is fanning the flames to the fire that annihilated a previous generation of Jews. Meanwhile, there is no guarantee that this fire will be contained. Numerous antisemitic attacks were conducted against Jews in Europe by right-wing extremists (AA, 2023).

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