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Anti-Semitism: Jews Face a Widening Web of Hate

By Abraham H. Foxman

NEW YORK--Throughout the 1990s and even after Sept. 11, 2001, discussions about anti-Semitism often included the view that Jew hatred had diminished and was no longer a real threat. Such complacency is dangerous. Anti-Semitism is not a relic of history but a current event. Its resurgence is stronger and more widespread than even the most pessimistic among us predicted. And the threat is growing. Indeed, the contemporary rise of this oldest hatred in the world is by far the greatest since the 1930s, sharing some characteristics of that most terrible time for Jews. But it also has new forms and modes of transmission.

In one weekend in November, two synagogues in Istanbul, Turkey, were attacked simultaneously by suicide bombers, and a Jewish school outside Paris was destroyed by arson. These attacks occurred about a month after the Malaysian prime minister, in his swan song to the leaders of 57 Islamic nations, issued a call to a holy war against the Jews "who rule this world by proxy." Mahathir Mohamad proclaimed that Jews were not just the enemy of Muslims but of all peoples and nations. Whether the suicide bombers in Turkey were moved by his message is a question that will probably go unanswered. But one thing is clear: Their acts were motivated by a deep-seated anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, in the United States, a Holocaust museum in Terre Haute, Ind., was leveled by arson. The attacker left behind the words "Remember Timmy McVeigh," which were spray-painted on an exterior wall. Acts of vandalism and intimidation and anti-Semitic graffiti have hit other Jewish communities across the country as well.

Where does this hatred come from? Why is it growing today?

Historically, anti-Semitism shares many characteristics with such forms of prejudice as racism and xenophobia. What makes it different--and what lies at the core of the disease--is the notion that Jews may appear to be people like you and me but are, in fact, alien, conspiratorial, all-powerful evil beings.

That premise underlies the medieval charge of blood libel against Jews and of the poisoning of wells as an explanation for the Black Plague. Even today, Jews are accused of using Christian blood in their rituals.

That premise underlies the belief that the forged document known as "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," created by the czarist police in 1903, was a real Jewish plan to take over the world.

That premise allowed Adolf Hitler to convince huge numbers of Germans that they were the victims of the insidious Jew and that they had to do anything to protect themselves from this all-powerful foe.

Today, nearly 60 years after the slaughter of 6 million Jews in Europe, this core of anti-Semitism is finding new life, not merely on the margins where it always had followers but among the mainstream in too many societies, though mostly in the Islamic world.

Anti-Jewishness has always been part of the refusal by Arabs and the Islamic world to recognize Israel's legitimacy as a state. But that attitude has taken on a far more ominous tone than the political, nationalistic hostility of earlier times. One example of how the idea of the all-powerful alien Jew has entered the mainstream is the theory, believed by tens of thousands of Arabs and Muslims, that Israel and Jews--not Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda terrorists--were the "real" perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The mere fact that so many believe this fantastic, ugly lie is testament to the dispersion of anti-Semitic stereotypes. In today's global village, the

Internet and satellite communications allow the anti-Semitism spewed in mosques, newspapers, television, governments and intellectual circles to crisscross the globe instantaneously and to enter homes uninvited.

The results of this kind of poison are immediate and long-term. For now, it helps recruitment of Middle East suicide bombers who see the Jew as victimizer. In Europe, it caused hundreds of attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions over the last three years. The hesitation of European governments to apprehend and prosecute the perpetrators, most of whom are Muslims, is disturbing, as is their unwillingness to acknowledge that one-sided condemnation of Israeli policies creates a climate in which anti-Semitism flourishes. If you doubt that excessive criticism of Israel fans hostility and hatred that feeds anti-Semitism, consider a recent European Union poll. When asked which nation poses the greatest threat to world peace, a majority of respondents answered: Israel. In its frequency and tone, EU criticism of Israeli policies has tainted the entire state of Israel.

As bad as the new anti-Semitism has been, however, it could become far worse unless good people begin to stand up. The combination of Jew hatred and the accumulation of weapons of mass destruction by hostile governments makes the threat of this anti-Semitism the greatest since the Holocaust.

What is needed now--unlike what happened in the 1930s when the world stood by until it was too late to save the Jews of Europe--is a united and vigorous stand by free nations and free peoples against anti-Semitism. This is necessary not only because it is the moral thing to do but also because it is a matter of self-interest. The idea that anti-Semitism is the canary in the coal mine--the first warning against an insidious danger--has never been more relevant. It will only start with the Jew; it will not stop there.

That is why efforts by some to blame the surge of anti-Semitism on the policies of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon are not only wrong but highly damaging. Certainly, one can be critical of Israel and its policies and not be anti-Semitic. We daily read such legitimate criticism in the Israeli and American press. But it is indisputable that the criticism of some is fueled by anti-Semitism.

How to distinguish the two? When the United Nations repeatedly accuses Israel--and only Israel--of human rights violations, or when the U.N. General Assembly votes, as it did, to raise the issue of Israel's security fence with the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Israel is judged by a different standard than the rest of the world. That is anti-Semitism. When Zionism--the nationalistic aspiration of the Jewish people to have a homeland, a culture, a common society and capital--is harshly criticized but other nationalistic movements are spared such antipathy, that's anti-Semitism. The Jew hatred at the core of such selective treatment of Israel has far, far more to do with scapegoating Jews for all the ills in the world--in this case mostly in the Islamic world--than any one event involving Israel and the Palestinians.

History teaches that we must not be complacent, that anti-Semitism has a life of its own, that it has little to do with the behavior of Jews but with using Jews as the ultimate scapegoat. Democratic leaders and good people must stand up--for their own sake as well as for the sake of Jewish communities--so that the theme of "never again" will be a living reality.

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