**The history of anti-Semitism**

Sabeel webinar, 29.5.2024

1. As Omar has just explained, in 2023, Sabeel published *This is Where we Stand: A Sabeel Reflection on Antisemitism*. There is something historic in the publication of this long 148 p. document by a Palestinian center of reflection. At the book launch I called the document “important, courageous, creative, prophetic and complicated”. I have been asked to briefly sketch the history of antisemitism and I will try to do so.

2. Antisemitism is a 19th century term. Its evolution is intimately connected with the development of nationalism in Europe and the growing sentiment among some nationalists that Jews were alien to the nations that were evolving – German, French, Italian, English, etc. Antisemitism is a secular idea that posits the Jews as a distinct ethnic or racial group, sometimes based on modern theories of evolution, genetics and biology. It is a distinct form of racism.

3. From an historical point of view, antisemitism is closely tied to anti-Judaism, a theological construct that developed primarily in the Christian world. From the point of view of anti-Judaism, Jews were seen as those who rejected Jesus Christ the son of God, called for his death (making them God-killers) and stubbornly refused to accept that salvation was only through him. As a consequence, the people that had once been chosen by God, was rejected and destined to wander the face of the earth, eternally cursed by God and homeless among peoples. The Church replaced Israel as God’s holy people. In Christendom, anti-Judaism too often and in too many places led to the socio-economic and political marginalization of Jews, discrimination against them, their expulsion and sometimes violence, persecution and massacre. For the most part, Jews who converted to Christianity were no longer seen as Jews and were able to socially, politically and economically integrate into general society. However, already in the 15th century, some argued that Jews were still suspect, even after having become Christians, because they did not have pure blood.

4. With the secularization of Europe, traditional anti-Judaism mutated for many into a new form of Jew hatred, antisemitism. The reason for distrusting Jews, discriminating against them and persecuting them was no longer formulated in uniquely theological terms. Rather, Jews were now seen in a negative light because of their supposed ethnic, cultural or national otherness. According to ethnocentric nationalists, they constituted a threat to the modern nation, essentially traitors, supporting Communism and capitalism (yes, both) as strategies to control the world through cosmopolitan ideologies that crushed the spirit of the particular nation. Antisemites tried to define Jews as fundamentally different, a difference that did not dissolve in waters of baptism or in bureaucratic processes of becoming citizens.

5. One of the seminal cases of modern antisemitism was that of the French military captain Alfred Dreyfus, put on trial in 1894. Seeking the spy who had passed military secrets to the enemy, many in France became convinced that the spy was Dreyfus. This was not based on evidence but on the fact that Dreyfus was Jewish and therefore by definition disloyal. The theme of disloyalty led antisemites to formulate conspiracy theories that the Jews were plotting to take over the world. To the crimes of disloyalty and conspiracy were added the crimes of disordered greed and sexual perversion. Jews were seeking to dominate the world in order to conquer unlimited wealth and sully “our” women. A sordid version of this theory was the basis of the book, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an antisemitic classic. Pseudo-scientific theories of race determined that the Jews were an inferior race, characterized by materialism,

legalism, and devoid of tolerance and morality.

6. In the aftermath of the First World War and the crushing defeat of Germany and her allies, antisemitism was strengthened among those looking for a scapegoat for the woes of the post-war period. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party he founded became obsessed with Jews and vowed to destroy them. Coming to power in 1933 in Germany, the Nazis began a process of ridding Germany of its Jews. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and the speedy conquest of a huge part of Europe by the German army, the Nazis were able to broaden their campaign against Jews to other parts of Europe. In 1942, the Nazis formulated a Final Solution, a plan to rid Europe of its Jewish population.

7. By the end of the war in 1945, the Nazis had succeeded in exterminating about six million Jews through deportations, massacres, state-sponsored starvation and spread of disease and the development of an extermination industry that carried out a well-planned genocide. It was in the aftermath of discovering the proportions of the Shoah that many were sympathetic to the Jews and supported a homeland for the Jews in Palestine.

8. In fact, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in the face of antisemitism, some Jews began to try and formulate a response to it. Some engaged in the fight against antisemitism in their own countries, others proposed migration to countries in the new world (especially the US) where antisemitism was supposedly less rife. And some proposed a Jewish nationalism, Zionism, in the image and likeness of similar European movements. It was founded on the premise that not only was anti-Semitism a threat to Jews but that it could not and should not be fought against. Until the Shoah, many Jews rejected this ideology, preferring to fight for integration in their own countries.

9. Zionism is a diverse ideological movement that seeks to mobilize Jewish religious consciousness, Biblical texts about Palestine and the plight of Jews facing antisemitism and persecution. Political Zionism with its own organization was established in the 1890s by Theodor Herzl and his collaborators. They proposed that antisemitism not be countered but rather be mobilized to promote Zionism and its vision of a Jewish homeland.

10. European-style antisemitism has unfortunately found supporters in the Arab world too. Quranic texts ripped out of context are brandished to promote religious hostility to Jews. Furthermore, myriad conspiracy theories about Jewish political and economic power incite some to hatred of Jews. However, some Zionists try to make every manifestation of support for Palestinians and their rights sound antisemitic. The current confusion between legitimate criticism of the State of Israel and its army and antisemitism is particularly unhelpful at this present time. Some ideological attempts to define antisemitism have created further confusion. Ultimately, those fighting for the liberation of Palestinians and their right to equality, for justice and peace are on the same side as those fighting all forms of racism, including antisemitism and Islamophobia.

11. In conclusion, it is important to note that anti-Judaism and anti-Islam, antisemitism and islamophobia, are intimately linked. From a historical point of view, it is particularly pertinent to reflect on episodes like the Crusades and the Inquisition in the Iberian Peninsula. These significant moments of the expression of anti-Judaism were also peak moments in the development of anti-Islam. Likewise, the modern phenomenon of antisemitism is intertwined with the ideology of islamophobia as Muslims are characterized by the same tropes of hostility.