Allah's England?

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The oldest Jewish cemetery in England is in Mile End, in the heart of the East End of London. It was created exactly 350 years ago on the orders of the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, who, overruling his own council, officially readmitted Jews to England for the first time since their expulsion in 1290. I came across it recently while visiting Queen Mary University, where I had once taught history, to give a public lecture.  
  
The disused cemetery is now marooned on the Queen Mary campus, which is itself an island in the East End, an area long since abandoned by Jews and now populated mainly by Muslims. With its graves dating back to the 1660's, Mile End is thus a reminder both of the continuity of Jewish life in Britain and of its precariousness. And the reminder is timely, for today the atmosphere in England has become less hospitable for Jews than at any time since Sir Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts marched through the East End in the 1930's.  
  
You do not have to go far from Queen Mary University to discover one reason why Jews—and not only Jews—are feeling insecure. Less than a mile away stands the East London Mosque, whose chairman, Muhammad Abdul Bari, is also secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain. This makes him, in effect, the chief spokesman for British Muslims. On the eve of the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Bari told the Sunday Telegraph:  
  
Some police officers and sections of the media are demonizing Muslims, treating them as if they're all terrorists-and that encourages other people to do the same. If that demonization continues, then Britain will have to deal with 2 million Muslim terrorists—700,000 of them in London.  
  
In fact, far from demonizing Muslims, the police have gone to inordinate lengths to accommodate their sensitivities. Scotland Yard now consults selfappointed community leaders like Bari before mounting anti-terrorist operations in “Muslim areas”—thereby risking the possibility that secret information might leak out and compromise public safety. Since the London bombings of July 7, 2005, which killed 53 people, the police have been obliged to keep thousands of Muslims under surveillance while investigating up to a hundred separate conspiracies to commit terror. But rather than expressing shame that such unprecedented measures have been necessary, “moderate” Muslim leaders like Muhammad Abdul Bari have responded with thinly veiled blackmail. As often as not, British support for Israel is invoked as high on the list of Muslim grievances. The message is simple: unless Britain withdraws that support, every Muslim will become a potential suicide bomber.  
  
Such implicit threats have had their effect on the non-Muslim majority. At a dinner after my lecture, a professor remarked, as if it were a generally accepted platitude: “Of course, the only terrorist state in the Middle East is Israel.” Nobody contradicted him. The delegitimization of Israel in the British academic world has become one aspect of a new and more powerful wave of outright anti-Semitism, a phenomenon that has been greatly accelerated by the response to last summer's war in Lebanon.  
  
In some ways, the new anti-Semitism is much like the old. Consider Jenny Tonge, a legislator from the Liberal Democratic party who gained notoriety two years ago by empathizing publicly with Islamist suicide bombers. She thereby distinguished herself even among the ranks of her fellow Liberal Democrats, who have seized on resentments against Israel and the U.S. with all the zeal of a third party struggling to get noticed in a twoparty system. Removed from her party post, though by no means disgraced, she was subsequently honored with a peerage. This summer's war in Lebanon enabled her to go a crucial step beyond extolling suicide bombers by attacking not only Israel but Jews in general. “The pro-Israel lobby has got its grips on the Western world,” she said in a speech at a party conference in September. Pausing for effect, she added: “its financial grips.” Another pause. “I think they've probably got a certain grip on our party.”  
  
The background to this heavy hint about undue Zionist influence on party politics was a scandal involving not the Liberal Democrats but Labor. In particular it was an allusion to Michael Levy, Prime Minister Tony Blair's special envoy to the Middle East and until recently the Labor party's chief fundraiser. In July, during the course of a police investigation into possible corruption, Lord Levy was briefly arrested. (It is unclear whether he will actually be charged with any crime.) The fact that he is Jewish is, of course, irrelevant to the case-but not to Jenny Tonge's inflammatory insinuation that Jewish money is corrupting British politics. Even so, she got away with it.  
  
A second example comes from the other side of the political spectrum. Sir Peter Tapsell, a senior Conservative member of parliament, claimed at the height of the Lebanon crisis that Blair was colluding with President Bush “in giving Israel the goahead” to commit “a war crime gravely reminiscent of the Nazi atrocity on the Jewish quarter of Warsaw.” This obscene equation, another staple of the anti-Semites, was uttered during a televised debate on the floor of the House of Commons. Yet Tapsell, too, got away with it, including in the conservative press; following his lead, the Telegraph published a cartoon depicting two scenes of devastation, one labeled “Warsaw 1943” and the other “Tyre 2006.”  
  
Not only do the Tapsells and Tonges go unreprimanded these days, they are admired and imitated. The loathing of Israel, once confined to oppositional groups, has penetrated to the very core of the British establishment. At the height of the Lebanon war, two peers of the realm reportedly came to blows within the hallowed precincts of the House of Lords. Apparently, Lord Janner, a prominent spokesman for Jewish causes, said something about Israel's right to self-defense that so enraged the octogenarian Field Marshal Lord Bramall that he was moved to assault his seventy-eight-year-old interlocutor. One might have supposed that, like misogyny, anti-Semitism had ceased to be a characteristic vice of the English upper class; this incident suggests that it is back with a vengeance.  
  
Of course, such things are not unique to England. If, according to opinion polls, two-thirds of Britons thought Israel had reacted “disproportionately” to Hizbullah's provocation in July, the same consensus was reflected straight across the continent, fostered and abetted by media coverage of the conflict. Europe's synthetic anger at Israel, skillfully manipulated by Hizbullah, appears to meet some deep-seated need to blame the Jews for Muslim rage against the West. Just as slurring Israel by identifying it with the Nazis has become commonplace, so has questioning Israel's very right to exist.  
  
One of the most infamous expressions of this new and unfettered brand of European anti-Semitism emerged this summer in Norway, where Jostein Gaarder, the author of Sophie's World, an international best-seller introducing children to philosophy, joined forces with Hamas, Hizbullah, and Ahmadinejad's Iran by calling for the extinction of the Jewish state. In an open letter published in Aftenposten, Norway's leading newspaper, Gaarder reached back into history to claim that “the first Zionist terrorists started operating in the time of Jesus.” He concluded his screed with a prophecy:  
  
The state of Israel in its current form is history ... But fear not! The time of trouble shall soon be over. The state of Israel has seen its Soweto. We are now at the watershed. There is no turning back. The state of Israel has raped the recognition of the world and shall have no peace until it lays down its arms.  
  
At an earlier stage in Norway's history, the great Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) had been similarly tainted by anti-Semitism and, in his case, pro-Nazism. After the war, Hamsun was punished despite his advanced years. In the present age, no one in the Norwegian government bestirred himself to utter a single word of criticism against the country's most celebrated writer. But soon after Gaarder's diatribe appeared in print, as if on cue, a plot was uncovered to destroy the Israeli and American embassies in Oslo.  
  
Britain, then, is hardly alone. Still, the degree to which anti-Semitism has seeped back into “one of the least anti-Semitic countries in the world” (in the words of Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks) is both startling and appalling. With the Lebanon war, it was as if a psychological dam had burst. The seepage suddenly became a flood.  
  
The dimensions of the flood were measured in an official report issued in August by an all-party parliamentary committee on anti-Semitism, none of whose members was Jewish. A growing “anti-Semitic discourse,” as the committee circumspectly phrased it, was creating “an atmosphere where Jews have become more anxious and more vulnerable to abuse and attack than at any other time for a generation or longer.”  
  
That is true enough, as is the fact, similarly noted by the report, that the “discourse” in question is as much a feature of the Left as of the far Right. Nevertheless, the report's authors go out of their way to exonerate those on the Left who “perhaps do not even realize that the language and imagery they have used has resonances of a long tradition of anti-Jewish discourse and stereotypes.” Even if this were the case, which is highly doubtful, it would hardly diminish the impact of the constant repetition of anti-Semitic tropes and iconography in the left-wing media, from a cover story in the New Statesman titled “Kosher Conspiracy” and illustrated by a Star of David piercing a Union Jack to the Guardian's cartoon image of an Israeli fist with Star of David brass knuckles smashing the face of a Lebanese child.  
  
But that is not the only or the most blatant dodge of which the authors of the report were guilty. Among Muslims, they write, only “a minority ... of extremists” are guilty of anti-Semitic speech. In plain fact, anti-Semitism is a fixture of even the most mainstream Muslim organizations. Here and elsewhere, and most especially in its failure to nail the lie that Israel's existence or behavior is at the root of the problem, the report rationalizes Muslim anger and contributes to the most damaging libel of all: that Jews are to blame for the hatred of which they are the victims.  
  
Finally, the report is stuck in an outdated notion of prejudice-namely, that it is to be understood as a product of racism, preferably of the neo-Nazi variety. This is what allows the authors to overlook the influence of religion (i.e., [Islam](http://scipaper.blogspot.com/2015/02/islam.html)) and understate the influence of culture (especially of the left-wing variety) in fomenting the violent attitudes and behavior they abhor. According to the Community security Trust, which monitors physical and verbal attacks on Jewish targets, there was an unprecedented rise in anti-Semitic incidents during the Lebanon conflict, with over 90, three times the monthly average, clocked in July alone. Even more sinister than the attacks themselves, many of which were clearly linked to hostile reporting about Israel, were the profiles of those responsible. Muslims, not surprisingly, were “overrepresented.” But so too were middle-class, educated whites, and women as well as men.  
  
British Jews, themselves overwhelmingly middle-class and educated, are thus faced with a nightmarish choice: to repudiate Israel or to lose their liberal credentials-if not, indeed, their British credentials. The perverted reasoning goes like this: since Israel is at fault for inciting Islamist terrorism in England, those who refuse to dissociate themselves from Israel are acting against the British national interest. This argument can be conveniently adapted to suit leftists or rightists, internationalists or isolationists, the prejudices of the ignorant or the convictions of the sophisticated.  
  
There IS also, to be sure, an element of plain old-fashioned fear behind much of the new anti-Semitism. Just what the British are afraid of became obvious when an al-Qaeda conspiracy to destroy up to five transatlantic airliners was foiled early in August, just as the Lebanon war was ending. Two things magnified the impact of the revelation: the spectacular scale of the plot itself-fully comparable to 9/11-and the fact that the two dozen suspects who were arrested were British. Briefly and frighteningly, the focus of the global war on terror shifted from the faraway battlegrounds of Baghdad to the leafy suburbs of London. The Home secretary, John Reid, was compelled to impose crippling security measures on all British terminals; at Heathrow, the world's busiest airport, the clampdown triggered alarm and disruption on a huge scale.  
  
Although the plot had nothing to do with the war in Lebanon-the police had been watching the suspects for many months-the occasion was seized upon and exploited to shift the blame once again onto Israel and the West, especially in the form of the U.S.- and UK-led war on terrorism. Two days after the airport-security alert, an open letter to Tony Blair from a broad coalition of Muslim politicians and organizations appeared in fullpage newspaper advertisements. Under the heading, “Protect Civilians Wherever They Are,” the letter slyly equated victims of Islamist terrorism in the West with Lebanese or Palestinian casualties in the conflict with Israel. It was, according to the signers, “the debacle of Iraq and now the failure to do more to secure an immediate end to [Israeli] attacks on civilians in the Middle East” that was putting “civilians at increased risk both in the UK and abroad.” Blair was thus duly warned that he had better “change our foreign policy to show the world that we value the lives of civilians wherever they live and whatever their religion.”  
  
This brings us to the link between the new antiSemitism and the latest developments in British party politics. Even before the disclosure of the bomb plot, it was becoming clear that the relentlessly hostile portrayal of Israel in the media was undermining Tony Blair's status. In an atmosphere in which demonstrators in Trafalgar Square were proclaiming “We Are All Hizbullah Now,” sticking up for Israel's right to self-defense was made to seem tantamount to condoning the massacre of innocents.  
  
In July, with the prime minister on an extended trip to the United States, several of his own cabinet ministers took the opportunity to distance themselves from his stance on the Lebanon war by denouncing Israel's actions as-that word, again “disproportionate.” Speaking before a Muslim audience, Jack Straw, Blair's former foreign secretary and Labor's floor leader in the House of Commons, attacked both Israel and indirectly Blair himself for “destabilizing the already fragile Lebanese nation.” In the United States, Blair was privately adjured by his ambassador and by the current foreign secretary, Margaret Beckett, to abandon his support of President Bush's view that Israel must be allowed to defeat the Hizbullah terrorists. Capitulating at last, Blair insisted while in Los Angeles that he understood Muslims who “see only the bombs and the brutality of war, and sent from Israel,” and called on the West to “bend every sinew of our will to making peace between Israel and Palestine.”  
  
But these rhetorical concessions were not enough to win the forgiveness of his party. By the time a ceasefire was brokered in Lebanon, leaving Israel frustrated and Hizbullah largely intact, most of Blair's cabinet had concluded that his support for Israel and George Bush-both integral to his neoconservative convictions-had become an electoral liability in a Britain where the Muslim vote might well swing the next general election. And so the stage was set for a very British coup. In the dog days of August, a plot was hatched to force Blair out in favor of his old rival, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. After two weeks of frenzied maneuvering, and facing the prospect of open revolt, Blair finally gave way, announcing that the party's conference in September would be his last.  
  
The British establishment had suffered a collective nervous breakdown. Unnerved by the threat of internal as well as external terrorism, chafing under the yoke of a strong leader who had forced it to leave its European comfort zone and face up to the clash of civilizations, it panicked. Only a year after Blair had overcome the nation's doubts about the invasion of Iraq to gain an unprecedented third term for Labor, he was being forced into a humiliating exit. Thus did the response to Israel's war with Hizbullah become the catalyst for the most shameful betrayal of a prime minister since the ouster of Margaret Thatcher by her own party in 1990.  
  
The left, of course, exulted. So, undoubtedly, did Europe's Islamists. Having by their violent actions dispatched Prime Minister José María Aznar of Spain, and then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, they were soon to be rid of a far more formidable enemy: Tony Blair.  
  
But where in all this were the British Conservatives? For a while, it appeared that the chief beneficiary of the Blair putsch would be not his putative successor Gordon Brown, who emerged rather soiled in the eyes of the public, but David Cameron, the leader of the opposition. By far the most inexperienced person to lead the Conservative party in the three centuries of its history, Cameron had never held ministerial office, and had yet to make a single speech about foreign policy. The revolt against Blair thus gave him a unique opportunity to take possession of the legacy of Churchill and Thatcher: patriotic and democratic, cosmopolitan and conservative, pro-Atlanticist, pro-Zionist, pro-active in the struggle against totalitarian creeds.  
  
Cameron chose the anniversary of 9/11 to deliver his first major foreign-policy address. But instead of demonstrating that he was big enough to fill Tony Blair's shoes, he joined those criticizing Blair for aligning England too closely with the United States, and devoted the intellectual core of his speech to an emphatic rejection both of the Bush doctrine and of neoconservatism. Calling for “humility and patience” in dealing with the Muslim world, Cameron blamed Bush and Blair for having “fanned the flames of anti-Americanism, both here in Britain and around the world.” The terrorists, he stipulated, were “driven by a wholly incorrect interpretation-an extreme distortion-of the Islamic faith”; but their “deformed vision” was nevertheless “part of a wider picture that includes the perception by many Muslims that Islam is under attack ... and the belief that the West deliberately fails to resolve issues of crucial concern to Muslims, like Palestine.”  
  
The Muslim “beliefs” and “perceptions” cited by Cameron are monstrous lies. But no matter: unlike Tony Blair, who had been “slavish” toward the United States, he for his part pledged to show “sensitivity” toward Islamic nations. Above all, he said, the West must demonstrate its “humility and patience” toward Islam by dissociating itself from Israel's behavior in Lebanon. About the existential threat to Israel from its neighbors, about the wave of anti-Semitism that has gripped the Islamic world and is infecting his own country, Cameron spoke not a word; nor did he give any hint of sharing Blair's conviction that Israel's war on terror was the West's war, too. Instead, the Tory leader came close to suggesting that the West had picked the wrong side in the Middle East conflict.  
  
One need not look far for explanations of the new Conservative policy toward Islam and Israel. Among its other purposes, Cameron's speech was aimed as a pitch to Muslim voters, some of whom certainly took notice. “The Tories are reaching out to us and we must reach out to them,” commented the Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK, a radical Islamist organization that supports jihad and is implacably hostile not only to Israel but to Jews (a.k.a. “the Zionist community”).  
  
Others, admittedly, were less impressed. At a cocktail party on the evening of September 11,1 encountered the writer and Middle East expert David Pryce-Jones, who, having read reports of Cameron's speech, told me he had decided to quit the Conservative party. George Osborne, Cameron's second-in-command, happened to be standing nearby, so I introduced him to Pryce-Jones, who gave the politician a piece of his mind. In a long and heated discussion, Osborne defended the party leader's speech on political grounds by stating that Lebanon had been the last straw for the British public, which simply would no longer support Blair's foreign policy. He also believed that most Americans felt the same way, and had by now abandoned Bush-style neoconservatism. Osborne paid no attention to Pryce-Jones's reasoned objections. Instead, an account of the exchange, hostile to Pryce-Jones, was planted in a gossip column. Cameron and his circle do not take kindly to criticism.  
  
When, last March, I wrote with modest hopefulness in these pages about “Britain's neoconservative moment,” I could not have foreseen this latest turn of events. What will it mean for the Atlantic alliance if the British people in general and the Labor party in particular have indeed given up on the war against terrorism, and if the Tories mean to exploit their new political opportunity by appeasing Islamic radicalism?  
  
Two recent incidents suggest at least the possibility that the situation is not quite hopeless, and that reality may yet break in. The first was Pope Benedict XVIs brief critique of the doctrine of jihad, a critique whose validity was immediately confirmed by the hysteria and violence it evoked in the Muslim world. Leaving aside the question of what exactly Benedict meant by quoting the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus on Muhammad's “evil and inhuman ... command to spread by the sword the faith he preached,” his words put European Christians on the spot.  
  
For too long, such Christians have passed by on the other side as their own co-religionists have been persecuted in Muslim lands. They have hidden behind the pretense that, in David Cameron's words, Islamist terrorism is “a wholly incorrect interpretation-an extreme distortion-of the Islamic faith.” No doubt the Muslim demonstrators outside Westminster Cathedral who demanded the Pope's execution, and who held up banners proclaiming “Islam will conquer Rome,” were indeed extremists. But they were also one end of a continuum of intolerance that embraces much of Islam. The number of Catholics suffering persecution in Muslim countries has been estimated at more than 100 million. By speaking out, the Pope ran the risk of making their situation even worse. But now that he has spoken out, European Christians in general and Catholics in particular have a duty to decide where they stand on freedom of speech and religion.  
  
It was very striking that public opinion in Britain overwhelmingly supported the Pope, even though no politician defended him. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, praised the “extraordinarily effective and lucid thesis” of Benedict's lecture and called on Muslims to address Islam's association with violence “as a matter of great urgency.” It was not Islamophobia in the West, Carey said, but rather the Muslim world's “deep-seated Westophobia” that made the confrontation between the two civilizations “potentially cataclysmic.” True, the rest of the Anglican and Catholic hierarchies preferred to behave as if the Pontiff had apologized and moved on. But Benedict's words have clearly had a historical and spiritual resonance that will outlast transient political discourse.  
  
The second incident took place not far from the Jewish cemetery at Mile End with which I began. In mid-September, soon after Blair set a date for his departure, Home secretary John Reid came to the East End to talk to a Muslim audience. His message was an unpalatable one: your sons and daughters, he said, are in danger of being “groomed” to become suicide bombers. If you are worried about this, tell the police.  
  
One member of the audience, a Jamaican convert to Islam who calls himself Abu Izzadeen, interrupted the minister: “How dare you come to a Muslim area?” Impressed by the highly articulate Abu Izzadeen, the BBC promptly invited him to appear on its flagship Today program. Millions listened as he denounced Reid as a “murderer” and Blair as “an enemy to Muslims and an enemy to Allah.” Dismissing democracy and free speech, Abu Izzadeen declared that Britain “doesn't belong to you, or to the Queen, or to the government, but to Allah. He has put us on earth to implement shari'a law.”  
  
The BBC's toughest interviewer, John Humphreys, was speechless. So were many others-but with rage. Opinion polls showed that Reid, already a hero for his role in uncovering the transatlantic bomb plot and Blair's most loyal lieutenant, was suddenly the most popular candidate to succeed him. Like Nicolas Sarkozy, his counterpart in France, Reid is seen as tough on terror and tough on the causes of terror. If, faced with the terrifying prospect represented by the likes of Abu Izzadeen, the British are perhaps not so sure that Cameron-style “humility” is quite what they want, that is good news.  
  
Indeed, Abu Izzadeen's attempt to claim the East End as an exclusively “Muslim area” may not be mere fantasy. In 2012, the East End will host the Olympics. Waiting to be built, in a spot adjacent to the Olympic village, is the largest place of worship in Europe: the London Markaz, part of a vast complex projected to cost £100 million, most of it coming from Saudi Arabia. The organizational backer for this project is Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim missionary group that the FBI has labeled a recruiting ground for al Qaeda.  
  
London, with over 1,000 mosques, is already Europe's unofficial Muslim capital. Its status will be enhanced immeasurably by the Markaz, whose size-it is projected to hold 70,000 worshippers-will dwarf St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. To contemplate the building of so potent a symbol of Islamic triumphalism over Europe's Christian heritage is all but incredible.  
  
Will it happen? Britain today is a nation torn between defiance and appeasement, led by a political elite that with few exceptions seems to be intimidated by Islam and reluctant to address-when it is not complicit in-anti-Semitism. The British people are not lost to the West, but the battle to preserve liberty in their country is only just beginning. Which makes it all the more fitting that the immediate battleground should be the East End, the place where so much began in the days when Cromwell's Latin secretary, John Milton, was writing Areopagitica, his great defense of free speech, and when Menasseh ben Israel was pleading successfully for Jews to be treated with toleration.