ABSTRACT
The apparent resurgence of hostility against Jews has been a prominent theme in recent discussions of Europe. At the same time, the adversities of the Muslim populations on the continent have received increasing attention as well. In this article, I attempt a historical and cultural clarification of the key terms in this debate. I argue against the common impulse to analogize anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Instead, I offer an analytic framework that locates the two phenomena in different projects of exclusion. Anti-Semitism was invented in the late 19th century to police the ethnically pure nation-state; Islamophobia, by contrast, is a formation of the present, marshaled to safeguard a supranational Europe. Whereas traditional anti-Semitism has run its historical course with the supersession of the nation-state, Islamophobia threatens to become the defining condition of the new Europe. [anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, European Union, Europe]

ANTI-SEMITISM has been in the news for much of the new millennium. Only a few years ago, it had seemed a faint memory of a distant past. But now, Europe, the cradle of anti-Semitism, appears afflicted again. Newspaper stories relate shocking accounts of individual violence from France to Germany, and commentators speculate on the nature and causes for the reawakened scourge.

In the process, something akin to a debate has developed on this “new” anti-Semitism. On one side is what some have called the “alarmists” (e.g., Chesler 2003; Foxman 2003; Schoenfeld 2004). They tend to see the recent rise in anti-Semitic violence as an immediate and massive threat not only to Europe’s Jews but also to Jews worldwide. This perspective is not really surprising, given that anti-Semitism appears to them as a kind of historical constant. Holocaust guilt may have suppressed it somewhat in the last few decades, but now Israel’s policies in the struggle with the Palestinians are giving Europe renewed license to openly despise the Jews. For alarmists, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are close to indistinguishable, and any critique of the Jewish state carries potential residues of the longest hatred. What used to come in the garb of extreme right-wing nationalism is now often dressed as extreme left-wing anticolonialism, anticapitalism, and antiglobalism. As a target of derision and violence, Europe’s Jews function as a proxy for Israel, the United States, and all of the forces of globalization. As such, they are not only victims of militant leftists but of Islamic radicals as well. Indeed, for most alarmists, the new anti-Semitism is centrally an Islamic phenomenon, spurred by anti-Semitic excesses in the Arab world and transported to Europe by the growing Muslim population there. The appeasement of that population also accounts for what alarmists generally regard as the lackluster response to the anti-Semitic crisis. Europe’s governments, they reason, are ready to abandon their Jewish citizens to preserve a volatile peace. Unsurprisingly, most alarmists can be found on the political right, and they also tend to support the global policies of the Bush administration. Their commitment to Israel, in turn, is often expressed in support for and trust in the Sharon government.
Their opponents in the debate on the new anti-Semitism tend to be critics of the current Israeli and U.S. governments, who generally make their home on the left of the political spectrum (see, e.g., Lando 2003; Sutcliffe 2004). In the course of the debate, they have been called “deniers,” although the term is rather inaccurate, given that none of them actually dispute the reality of anti-Semitism. They do, however, question its current salience. Rejecting the idea that criticism of Israel is inherently anti-Semitic, they discount a whole set of phenomena—pro-Palestinian demonstrations, angry attacks on Israel’s government, and so on—that alarmists regularly invoke to buttress their case for Europe’s anti-Semitism. Instead, they point to the relatively small number of actual incidents of physical violence and emphasize the degree of comfort Jews enjoy across the continent. Deniers do recognize that individual Jews and Jewish institutions have increasingly become victims of abuse. But they tend to see those cases as part of larger formations of violence perpetrated by the extreme right wing against Europe’s minorities. On some occasions, Jews may have been assaulted by young Muslims; but, mainly, it is Jews and Muslims together who are targeted as Europe’s Others.

Simply put, both sides are wrong. Neither is Europe a haven for a renewed and unbridled anti-Semitism somehow coded into the social DNA of the continent nor can all anti-Semitic incidents be subsumed under a general rubric of right-wing violence. Both explanatory frameworks ultimately falter because of their reliance on overly static views of history. For alarmists, anti-Semitism is an immutable force of history, whereas deniers see right-wing politics in unchanging terms. What is missing is a recognition of the radical historical transformations in the status and function of European anti-Semitism as well as the right wing’s project. So far, the stakes of the debate have prevented commentators and scholars from venturing beyond its terms, blinding us, for example, to the true implications of young Muslim immigrants in the new anti-Semitism. A sober analysis, however, is much needed, not least because the political ramifications of the new anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are far-reaching.

Monitoring anti-Semitism

Nothing exemplifies the debate between alarmists and deniers better than the controversy surrounding the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), the European Union’s research institute and think tank on racism and xenophobia. To alarmists, the EUMC became the paradigmatic denier when it suppressed a 2003 report on manifestations of anti-Semitism in the European Union that it had commissioned from the Center for Research on Antisemitism at Berlin’s Technical University. The report, which was subsequently made available by U.S. Jewish organizations, focused on the first half of 2002, when a widely reported wave of attacks took place in France and Belgium. The Berlin researchers regarded these attacks as a “new development” in that “anti-Semitic offenders” were “in some cases” drawn from “Muslim minorities in Europe—whether they be radical Islamist groups or young males of North African descent” (Bergmann and Wetzel 2003:21–22). In addition, the report stressed an ostensible connection between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, noting the media’s use of “anti-Semitic stereotypes in their criticism of Israel” and decrying the frequent occurrence of anti-Semitic agitation in the “extreme left-wing scene” (Bergmann and Wetzel 2003:7–8). Citing such examples as the juxtaposition of swastikas with Stars of David at far-left demonstrations, the authors suggested that anti-Semitism no longer emanated first and foremost from Europe’s right-wing extremists but from an emerging alliance of pro-Palestinian leftists, antiglobalization activists, and Islamists.

The EUMC, which is based in Vienna, regarded the report as an irresponsible indictment of entire populations, especially in its identification of Europe’s Muslims as a main source of the new anti-Semitism. Noting that the organization was “not in the business of stigmatizing whole communities on the basis of the actions of racist individuals” and citing the report’s “poor quality” and lack of “empirical evidence,” the EUMC rejected the findings in November of 2003 (Finn 2003: A20). At the same time, it vowed to continue research on anti-Semitism and promised publication of a comprehensive report in 2004. “Manifestations of Antisemitism in the EU 2002–2003” was issued by the EUMC in March 2004. The report commenced with a careful delineation that rejected the classification of all hostile acts against Jews as anti-Semitic. Only if Jews were targeted “as Jews” was it legitimate to speak of anti-Semitism. By implication, anti-Zionist attitudes were only anti-Semitic if “Israel is seen as being a representative of the Jew.” What was not to be considered anti-Semitic, therefore, was “hostility towards Israel as ‘Israel’, i.e. as a country that is criticized for its concrete policies” (EUMC 2004b:5–8). With this in mind, the EUMC found that the years under investigation saw an increase in anti-Semitic incidents in several European countries but that “the largest group of the perpetrators . . . appear[ed] to be young, disaffected white Europeans”; in some countries, “young Muslims of North African or Asian extraction” represented a “further source of antisemitism” (2004a:1). But this finding was immediately relativized. Not only did “traditionally antisemitic groups on the extreme right” play a part in “stirring opinion,” but, in addition, divergent modes of data collection rendered the precise identification of perpetrators itself doubtful (EUMC 2004a:1–2). In some countries, “the bulk of evidence [was] from the perceptions of victims.” Those were “difficult to verify,” thereby casting doubt on victims’ frequent classification
of perpetrators as “young Muslims,” “people of North African origin,” or “immigrants” (EUMC 2004c:5).

Predictably, the alarmists greeted the report with suspicion. The World Jewish Congress, for example, decried the findings as a “blatant whitewash for the sake of maintaining political correctness” (2004:1). Europe, it implied, was in the thrall of its burgeoning Muslim population, whose increasing radicalization was tolerated, even abetted, by E.U. actions. “Were the EU to recognize the truth, it would be forced to admit that its own statements and policies had, in no small measure, contributed to the anti-Jewish virus that has infected Europe” (World Jewish Congress 2004:3). What emerged in such comments is the perception of a Europe indifferent to, and possibly even complicit in, the resurgence of anti-Semitism. And the EUMC, that quintessential organization of the new Europe, seemed to be its consummate representative.

But interpreting the EUMC actions in those terms would be wrong. Like almost all of mainstream Europe, the organization is genuinely appalled by the specter of anti-Semitism. It sees it as Europe’s darkest inheritance and regards its transcendence as tantamount to the success of the European experiment. The very project of the European Union, in fact, is regarded by many of its greatest champions as nothing if not the antithesis to Nazism and the Holocaust. They see a pluralistic, supranational Europe as the most potent corrective to the genocidal nationalism on the continent. But if the Holocaust stands at the core of the new Europe, its lessons are seen to extend beyond the specificities of Jewish suffering to include all forms of exclusion and intolerance. Not insignificant in this regard is that the full designation of the EUMC is the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. Anti-Semitism is always mentioned as a top priority. But it rarely appears alone, as when the organization defended its decision to suppress the anti-Semitism report by Berlin’s Technical University by noting that “the EUMC remains 100% committed to its ongoing research on anti-Semitism and all forms of racism and intolerance” (Finn 2003: A20).1

To see anti-Semitism in line with other forms of racism and intolerance is not the same as to disregard it, even though some alarmists might construe it that way. But it does have crucial implications for one’s approach to the problem. For one thing, it suggests a framework that analogizes different groups on account of their experience of exclusion. For another, it trains the spotlight on a common source of racist and xenophobic animus.

The EUMC followed these very precepts in one of its most characteristic projects. “The Fight against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Bringing Communities Together” was an ambitious endeavor undertaken in 2002–03 with the support of the European Commission, the quasi government of the European Union. The project’s title was programmatic. In three successive meetings, community leaders and social scientists contemplated the situation of Jews and Muslims across Europe and discussed joint strategies for the struggle against racism and xenophobia. The explicit goal of the initiative was to “move beyond a single-minded focus on protecting the rights of very specific groups.” To stem the division of “people into separate groups, each struggling on their own,” EUMC Management Board Chairman Robert Purkiss proposed to “build bridges between our different communities, especially between those that are subjected to a range of hostile acts and discriminatory structures” (European Commission and EUMC 2003:102).

Those, Purkiss argued, could be traced to European Christianity:

Our conceptions of European identity are significant drivers of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. One of the similarities between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia is their historical relationship to a Europe perceived as exclusively Christian. Jews have of course suffered the most unspeakable crimes by European Christians. But it is true that all other religions, including Judaism and Islam, have been excised from the prevailing understanding of Europe’s identity as Christian and white. Both Islam and Judaism have long served as Europe’s “other”, as a symbol for a distinct culture, religion and ethnicity. [European Commission and EUMC 2003:103]

Here, then, is the purest articulation of the EUMC vision. Anti-Semitism exists at the heart of an exclusionary vision of Europe. But so, too, does Islamophobia. And, although Muslims have not suffered the trauma of genocide, their structural position as Other is ultimately analogous to that of Jews. Jews and Muslims, thus, have a common enemy in a right-wing Christian fundamentalism.

Historical differences

Politically, the EUMC project of bringing Europe’s Jewish and Muslim communities together is entirely commendable. Intellectually, however, it has serious flaws. To be sure, from the vantage point of Christianity, both Judaism and Islam are a certain kind of Other. Theologically and historically, however, the two occupy drastically different positions. Its role in the genealogy of Christianity—to say nothing about the millennia of active persecution—makes Judaism much more salient in the Christian imagination. But even this critical assessment goes along with the EUMC basic conceit of religion as a relevant, even predominant, factor in the contemporary phenomena of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. This, however, is highly dubious. After all, Europe’s post-Enlightenment trajectory has been shaped overwhelmingly by secular
forces—liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and fascism—and, if anything, secularism is becoming more, not less, dominant across the continent. To pin the homology of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia on a timeless Christianity is to deny its ever-diminishing relevance.

Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, then, need to be understood in secular perspective, and that immediately reveals them as time- and place-specific phenomena. Anti-Semitism, for its part, originated in the late 19th century. Both the term and its attendant ideology were the brain-child of German intellectuals who made the exclusion of Jews the cornerstone of a political and cultural movement. Hatred of Jews long preceded this movement, of course. But prior to the modern period, anti-Judaism operated on religious grounds. Persecution was often vicious, but, in theory, at least, Jews could overcome their stigma through conversion. What was new about the late 19th-century variant of Jew hatred was its anchoring in the notion of “race.” A secular concept grounded in modernity’s striving toward rational classification, the idea of “race” gave Jews an immutable biological destiny. All of this was connected to the project of nationalism, with the champions of anti-Semitism seeing themselves, first and foremost, as guardians of the ethnically pure nation-state. Given their racial difference, Jews could never belong to this national community, no matter their strivings for cultural assimilation. Jews, in other words, could never become German (or French, or English, etc.).

By contrast, Islamophobia has emerged quite recently. It is a phenomenon of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, fueled by geopolitics and unprecedented population movements that have brought millions of Muslims to Europe. A long-standing religious underpinning of Islamophobia could be construed on the basis of theological differences, of course. But the actual debate rarely engages religious questions in any meaningful way. Neither does it turn on the issue of race, although that, too, could be seen as a possible valence. What does stand at the heart of Islamophobic discourse is the question of civilization, the notion that Islam engenders a worldview that is fundamentally incompatible with and inferior to Western culture. As a result, Islamophobic claims are actually quite different from those of modern anti-Semitism. Whereas anti-Semites questioned Jews’ fitness for inclusion in the national community, Islamophobes are not particularly worried whether Muslims can be good Germans, Italians, or Danes. Rather, they question whether Muslims can be good Europeans. Islamophobia, in other words, functions less in the interest of national purification than as a means of fortifying Europe.

Organizations like EUMC conceive their struggles against racism and xenophobia as part of one larger battle against intolerance. But such a view obscures the distinctions between different forms of hostility. To argue for the fundamental analogy of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia is misleading, not only historically but also in terms of their contemporary articulations. What one needs to attend to is the specifics, which, in contrast to the EUMC assessment, to say nothing of the alarmists’ consensus, actually reveal the thorough insignificance at the current time of the modern variant of anti-Semitism.

To assert the irrelevance of the old anti-Semitism may seem shocking. But consider Europe’s realities against the backdrop of anti-Semitism’s political project. That project sought to secure the purity of the ethnic nation-state, a venture that has become obsolete in the supranational context of the European Union. There, Jews no longer figure as the principal Other but as the veritable embodiment of the postnational order. As president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi has invoked Europe’s Jews in exactly these terms:

I believe we can learn a lot from the history of the Jews of Europe. In many ways they are the first, the oldest Europeans. We, the new Europeans, are just starting to learn the complex art of living with multiple allegiances—allegiance to our home town, to our own region, to our home country, and now to the European Union. The Jews have been forced to master this art since antiquity. They were both Jewish and Italian, or Jewish and French, Jewish and Spanish, Jewish and Polish, Jewish and German. Proud of their ties with Jewish communities throughout the continent, and equally proud of their bonds with their own country. [2004:2]

Statements like this, and they are legion in the new Europe, could be, and sometimes are, dismissed as nothing but symbolic window dressing. But their ubiquity suggests the normalization of the Jewish presence in Europe. Ultimately, Prodi and other European politicians can offer such full-throated affirmations precisely because the sentiment is so utterly uncontroversial. In fact, no European party of any significance, and this includes the various extreme right-wing movements on the continent, currently champions a specifically anti-Semitic agenda.

Let me shine the spotlight for a moment on Austria, which I happen to study professionally and whose history of anti-Semitism is about as gruesome and shameful as it gets (see Pauley 1992). A brief comparison between the interwar period and the current moment quickly reveals the magnitude in the shift away from political anti-Semitism. In the period before World War II, every major political faction was overtly and programatically anti-Semitic. The German national parties sought the exclusion of Jews on racial grounds, whereas the Christian Social factions fought the Jewish presence out of a mixture of religious anti-Judaism and reactionary antimodernism. Even socialists (and communists) regularly deployed
anti-Semitism in their critiques of capitalism, notwithstanding that many of their leaders were, in fact, Jews.

To this day, Austria is dominated politically by these three factions. Anti-Semitism, however, has faded from their ideological arsenals. This development is actually quite recent. As late as the 1970s, Austria’s socialist chancellor Bruno Kreisky famously feuded with Simon Wiesenthal over the latter’s efforts to bring Austria’s Nazi criminals to justice, and the 1980s witnessed the Christian Social Austrian People’s Party’s reckless use of anti-Semitism in the presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim. Most significantly, Austria’s right-wing Freedom Party—formed as a successor party to the Union of Independents, which had been created as a haven for Austria’s former Nazis—centrally deployed anti-Semitism in its efforts to safeguard the country’s Germanic character.

By the early 1990s, however, the political tide was turning. As Austria’s grand coalition of Social Democrats and People’s Party positioned the country as a possible member of the European Union, they not only purged anti-Semitism from their political repertoire but also began a far-reaching rapprochement with Austria’s Jewish community (see Bunzl 2004). This process, which commenced with Austria’s official acknowledgment of coreponsibility for the Holocaust, engendered numerous political and cultural initiatives, including the creation of such institutions as Vienna’s Jewish Museum, designed to honor and celebrate Austria’s Jewish heritage, past and present.

Under the leadership of Jörg Haider, the Freedom Party initially maintained its distance from these developments. The party opposed Austria’s membership in the European Union on nationalist grounds and refrained from a full-scale repudiation of anti-Semitism. Haider, in fact, was on record with numerous comments that were easily construed as anti-Semitic. In the wake of Austria’s admission to the European Union in 1995, however, the Freedom Party’s politics changed. It abandoned its traditional nationalism and even began to court Jews as potential party functionaries. For a while, in fact, Peter Sichrovsky, the son of Holocaust survivors and a prominent member of Vienna’s Jewish community, ascended the ranks of the party (not without controversy, however). By the year 2000, when the Freedom Party entered Austria’s government in a coalition with the People’s Party, Haider was prepared to sign an official “Preamble” that admitted Austria’s culpability in the “horrendous crimes of the National Socialist regime” (Austrian Federal Government 2000:2). Subsequently, the Freedom Party acceded to an agreement for the compensation of Nazi slave laborers, and Haider himself helped negotiate the settlement of restitution for Austria’s Jewish community.

Some critics have argued that none of these actions were genuine and that the Freedom Party continues to be a haven of anti-Semitism. On some level, this may, in fact, be true, and continuous minor spats between Haider and Ariel Muzicant, the head of Vienna’s Jewish community, suggest this to be a possibility. But such an interpretation misses the enormous transformation of a party whose historical lineage includes many of history’s most vicious anti-Semites along with the German nationalist movement’s firm commitment to the exclusion of Jews. For such a party to run Jewish candidates for political office is not an insignificant thing.

Austria’s Freedom Party is not alone among Europe’s far-right-wing movements. Although several of them are rooted in traditions of virulent nationalism, none deploy conventional forms of anti-Semitism. In the interwar period, calls for Jewish exclusion were pervasive in European politics. Today, this goal is not on any discernible political agenda. The modern form of anti-Semitism has run its historical course.

**Anti-Semitism – anti-Zionism**

This does not mean, however, that one should be blind to the perils of the new anti-Semitism. Whereas the extent of the phenomenon remains in social scientific dispute, there is little doubt that an increase in anti-Semitic incidents has occurred since 2002 and that many of these, in a departure from traditional patterns of anti-Semitism, have been perpetrated by Muslim youth. Deniers have had trouble grasping the specifics of the current situation in light of their ongoing focus on anti-Semitism as a right-wing phenomenon. Alarmists, meanwhile, have emphasized the Islamic dimension of the new anti-Semitism but have offered an implausible explanation that sees it in direct continuity with older forms of Jew hatred.

The old and new anti-Semitism, however, are radically different phenomena, although perhaps not from the point of view of the victims. Violence, after all, is violence; and the concerns of Europe’s Jewish communities should give one pause, regardless of the source of the threat (see EUMC 2004d). But such considerations should not preclude careful political and historical analysis, especially given the flaws in the available explanations of the new anti-Semitism.

What separates the new from the old anti-Semitism is its overarching project. The traditional modern form of anti-Semitism was designed to effect the exclusion of Jews from the national body. This could take a range of forms, from the polemical assertion of Jews’ fundamental incompatibility with the nation to their genocidal eradication. In all the variants of this old anti-Semitism, Jews were construed as intrinsic outsiders to Europe’s nation-states, interlopers in a fantasy of ethnic purity.

Insofar as the new anti-Semitism is perpetrated by right-wing extremists, this cultural logic is still at work. But
when one approaches the phenomenon from its Islamic component, one sees a wholly different project. When young, disenfranchised Muslims attack French Jews, they do not do so in the interest of creating an ethnically pure France. Nor are they asserting that French Jews do not belong in Europe. On the contrary, they are attacking Jews precisely because they see them as part of a European hegemony that not only marginalizes Muslims in France but, from their point of view, also accounts for the suffering of the Palestinians. In the Arab world, Israel, after all, is understood first and foremost as a European colony. To explain Muslim violence against Europe’s Jews as the extension of an anticolonial struggle is no defense of the phenomenon. But it makes clear how radically different old and new anti-Semitism really are. Whereas the former sought to exclude Jews from the nation-states of Europe, the latter targets Jews precisely because of their Europeanness.

There is a terrible historical irony here. In the conception of Theodor Herzl and other Zionist leaders, it was the Jewish state that would resolve the tensions between Europe and the Jews. The Zionist state itself was to be a thoroughly European entity, of course. But those Jews who remained in Europe would also experience a transformation. No longer the stateless parasites despised by the old anti-Semitism, they would receive new respect as members of a viable national community. The existence of Jews in Europe would be enhanced, in other words, by their connection to a quasi-European nation-state. Over the decades, Europe’s Jewish communities have often seemed like satellites of Israel, in fact, and that may well have mitigated traditional anti-Semitic sentiments. Now, however, the connection has become a liability, as the Zionist promise of Europeanizing the Jews is haunted by its own success. As young Muslims target Jews as expatriates of a colonizing state, they confirm Zionism’s ultimate achievement: Europe’s Jews have finally become European.

This analysis, then, also speaks to the question of anti-Zionism. Alarmists often focus on the issue in their warnings against the new anti-Semitic threat. But their assertion that anti-Zionism is nothing but a permutation of the old anti-Semitism is plainly false. To be sure, certain ideologies underlying Islamic violence against Europe’s Jews do combine opposition to the state of Israel with systemic hostility against all Jews. But only a truly lunatic and utterly insignificant right-wing fringe on Europe’s political spectrum shares this particular set of antipathies.

Much more common is a set of hybrids. Certain elements on the European left were and are quite demonstrably anti-Zionist, for example. Typically, however, this position, which is usually articulated through a mixture of anticolonialism, antinationalism, and anticapitalism, also includes resolute opposition to the old anti-Semitism. Soviet-style communism was an example, at least in its early theory, combining a rejection of Jewish national difference with an absolute insistence on assimilation. In the present era, a similar amalgamation of sentiments fuels parts of Europe’s antiglobalization movement, whose more official spokespersons never tire in their condemnation of anti-Semitism, their criticism of Israel’s policies notwithstanding.

Another hybrid is a rich tradition, of which Zionism itself is a part, that unites support for a Jewish state with a view of Jews’ fundamental incompatibility with Europe’s nations. This anti-Semitic Zionism could often be found among Europe’s more centrist Right, in which it took the form of Jews’ symbolic exclusion on religious grounds. To those who felt that Jews would or should remain aliens in a Christian nation, the existence of Israel gave comfort in the knowledge that, especially in view of the Holocaust, Jews now had a state of their own. This tradition also accounts for the position of the U.S. religious Right, fervently supporting Israel while also working for the transformation of the United States into a fundamentalist Christian state.

In one variant or another, some of these positions still exist in today’s Europe. But they are completely marginal. The mainstream consensus, articulated by all political parties with any degree of influence, is based neither on anti-Semitism nor on anti-Zionism but on their conjoined repudiation. In contrast to the interwar years, when many of Europe’s parties openly declared their design for the minimization (or worse) of Jewish influence, leaders today champion the preservation both of Europe’s Jewish communities and of the state of Israel. The proliferation of official conferences addressing the new anti-Semitism suggests as much. By early 2004, large-scale events had been organized by the Anti-Defamation League, the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (two events), and the European Union; and at each of them, Europe’s governments rededicated themselves to the unconditional struggle against anti-Semitism as well as to Israel’s right to exist. And why not? Neither proposition is controversial from the vantage point of the new Europe.

Islamophobic realities

Contrast this consensus with the dynamics around the phenomenon of Islamophobia. Here, mainstream Europe speaks with anything but a unified voice. To be sure, the rise in anti-Muslim attacks following the events of September 11, 2001, prompted broad condemnations and led to increased monitoring of Islamophobia’s most violent aspects (EUMC 2002). But the overarching policy thrust has been decidedly more ambiguous, especially on the question of immigration. There, the European Union has coupled a nominal commitment to integration with efforts at centralization broadly intended to curb migratory
movements, particularly, although not exclusively, from the Arab and Islamic world.

By far the most crucial aspect of Islamophobia, however, concerns Turkey’s possible membership in the European Union. As early as 1963, the then-European Community signed an association agreement with Turkey to enhance trade and economic relations and work toward an eventual customs union. After many delays, such a union was finally achieved in 1995. By then, Turkey had also made a formal request for E.U. membership, which, after the unusually long period of 12 years, resulted in the 1999 recognition of Turkey as an applicant country. The latest stage in the process occurred in December 2004, when the E.U. heads of state decided on the formal commencement of accession talks, scheduled to begin in October of 2005.

Over the decades, a series of recurring concerns have marred Turkey’s aspirations for greater involvement in the European project. These centrally include the country’s economic status and political situation. Agreement is widespread that Turkey’s recognition as an E.U. applicant country led to enormous progress in these domains. Inflation has been curtailed, and the economy is rapidly modernizing and growing. At the same time, the role of the country’s military has been diminishing, and, for the first time in the history of the Turkish nation-state, minorities are accorded a certain degree of respect and a number of crucial rights. Turkey’s leadership expects to be rewarded for these reforms with eventual E.U. membership; and although concerns will remain on the table—many having to do with the country’s sheer size and overall demographics—the steady support of key figures in the European Union, from Tony Blair to Gerhard Schröder, bodes well for Turkey’s aspirations.

But there are also countless detractors. For this highly vocal group, no issue is more troubling than Turkey’s Muslim character, the country’s long tradition of secularism notwithstanding. Most prominently, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing—the former president of France and head of the Convention on the Future of Europe, the body charged with drafting a European constitution—has likened Turkey’s possible entry into the European Union to the end of Europe. Turkey, he asserted in November of 2002, had a “different culture, a different approach, a different way of life” (Leparmentier and Zecchini 2002: 2). The comment was controversial. But it captured a widespread sentiment, not only among the European Right, that Europe’s future would be endangered by the accession of a Muslim country.

Yet again the Austrian case is instructive. For some time now, Turkey’s possible membership in the European Union has been a prominent political theme. Whereas anti-Semitism has not played a discernible role in electoral politics in well over a decade, the question of Islam has been gaining importance with each vote. With the decision on accession talks expected later in the year, Turkey, in fact, was the dominant topic in the June 2004 election to the European Parliament.

Predictably, it was Haider’s Freedom Party that put the issue center stage. “Turkey into the EU? Not with me!” was the main slogan of the party’s leading candidate, plastered on thousands of billboards across the country. Here is how the party elaborated its position in a pamphlet sent to Vienna’s voters:

Just because 3% of Turkey happen to be in Europe geographically does not mean that Turkey is a European state …

It is a fact that there was no enlightenment and no renaissance in Turkey, those bases of European culture that form the standards for all member states of the EU. In addition, one of the most important values of Europeans, tolerance, does not count in Turkey: here, Christians are hassled in any possible way …

Turkey’s state institute for statistics forecasts a population of 95 million for the year 2050. The country with the highest population in the EU would then be Islamic!

Not without reason did Libya’s head of state Muammar Gadaffi note that Europe would accept an Islamic Trojan horse if Turkey became a member of the EU. This Trojan horse will not only cause social tensions of never anticipated proportions—also the question of Europe’s Islamization is being kept quiet by the fanatics for membership. Today, an estimated 15 million Muslims already live in the member states of the EU. Europe can save a lot if it spares itself. Turkey’s EU accession would certainly be the end of this community and it would also foil the basic idea of the process of European unification …

The fact that Turkey is part of NATO and has close economic ties with Europe, all that can be no reason to enable Turkey’s membership in a union that defines its identity out of a historical tradition. [Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs 2004]

The virulence of these sentiments may seem surprising. Yet they are entirely in keeping with the Freedom Party’s current agenda and rhetoric. Indeed, they virtually embody the party’s trajectory over the last decade.

When the Freedom Party abandoned its traditional nationalism in the mid-1990s, it embraced a new exclusionary project. Instead of the ethnic community, however, it now cast itself as the protector of Europe. This shift put the spotlight on a novel set of Others. Jews had interfered with the purity of the nation-state; but from
the vantage point of a supranational Europe, they were no longer outsiders. Rather, Europe was undermined by such groups as Africans and Asians, who quickly emerged as targets for surveillance and exclusion. Most importantly, however, it was Muslims who now appeared as a potential threat.

The 1997 Freedom Party platform made this transformation abundantly clear. In place of obeisance to the (German) nation, the party spoke of a general commitment to German and European history. There was much talk of Europe’s common values and heritage, and Judaism’s contributions to them were explicitly acknowledged. These European “foundations,” however, were “endangered by different streams of thought.” The platform identified “radical Islam” as the greatest threat. It was “penetrating Europe” and had to be stopped both at the national and European level (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs 1997:9).

In terms of policy, this meant a relentless focus on the question of immigration. With slogans like “Stopp der Überfremdung” [An end to the process of being overrun by foreigners], the Freedom Party at once generated and appealed to fears of Islamization. If anything, Jews were constructed as allies in this struggle over Europe’s future. “Among my Jewish friends,” a prominent Freedom Party politician announced in November of 1999, “there is outrage at the high degree of Islamic presence” (Die Gemeinde 1999: 8).

The Freedom Party’s agitations had enormous success. Even prior to the party’s 2000 entry into Austria’s governing coalition, its steady electoral gains forced the Social Democrats and People’s Party to severely tighten Austria’s immigration laws. The situation has not changed significantly in the wake of the party’s governance. Although internal squabbles have led to a string of electoral defeats, the Freedom Party continues to set the political agenda, particularly on issues regarding immigration and the future of the new Europe.

The 2004 E.U. election was a case in point. In making Turkey’s membership the core of its campaign, the Freedom Party not only provoked an often Islamophobic discussion but also effectively forced its competitors to take positions on the politically uncomfortable issue. Indeed, by the time the election neared, the leading candidates of all parties voiced their opposition to Turkey’s E.U. membership. None couched their resistance in the strident terms of the Freedom Party, and the candidates of the Social Democrats and Greens were particularly careful to avoid the semblance of Islamophobia. But Ursula Haubner, the Freedom Party national chair and Haider’s sister, was still left to gloat that, once again, Austria’s political establishment had come around to the Freedom Party position. “May I remind you that all the others had at least been ‘open’ to Turkey’s accession to the EU” (Austria Presse Agentur 2004: 1).

European futures

The Austrian situation is hardly unique, of course. All over Europe, immigration, the status of Islam, and the possibility of Turkey’s E.U. membership are central topics of political debate. As in Austria, the terms are, more often than not, dictated by the Far Right. And the eventual outcome, on Turkey’s accession, for example, is far from certain. Islamophobia, in this sense, is a genuine political issue, part of a wide-open debate on the future of the Muslim presence in Europe.

Anti-Semitism, by contrast, is not. This is not to downplay the dangers of the new anti-Semitism but to recognize that it operates on a completely different level. There simply is no debate on the legitimacy of the Jewish presence in Europe, unless one counts Ariel Sharon’s July 2004 plea that the Jews of France leave for Israel immediately. All factions of Europe’s political spectrum are united in their commitment to the future of European Jewry.

The EUMC analogy between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, of course, has some validity. Both, after all, are exclusionary ideologies mobilized in the interest of collective engineering. But the similarities end there. Whereas anti-Semitism emerged in the late 19th century and had its greatest influence in the early 20th century, Islamophobia is a phenomenon of the current age. And whereas anti-Semitism was designed to protect the purity of the ethnic nation-state, Islamophobia is marshaled to safeguard the future of European civilization. That an extreme right-wing fringe holds both ideologies simultaneously cannot obscure these fundamental distinctions.

Europe needs to address the problem of anti-Semitism, and it must do so on its own terms and in recognition of its particular history. Much more pressing, however, is the issue of Islamophobia, both in terms of Europe’s future and the geopolitical situation at large. As the European Union is moving toward the ratification and adoption of a common constitution, a number of approaches to Islam have emerged. One is the U.S. model, with its constitution beyond ethnic and religious principles and its civic encouragement of and respect for multiculturalism. Another is the French concept of “laïcité,” which, in demanding cultural homogeneity, at least affirms Muslims’ ability to become fully French (and, hence, European).

But more sinister visions exist, associated with right-wing figures from Jean-Marie Le Pen to Pim Fortuyn. To them, Muslims are bearers of a fundamentally distinct culture and, hence, essentially unassimilable. To preserve its character and greatness, Europe, they hold, has to erect a barrier, whether against Turkey’s membership in the European Union or the additional influx of immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. Support for this Islamophobic position seems to be growing and, were it to prevail, the geopolitical consequences would be
enormous. Not only would it halt the promising reforms in Turkey, but it would also likely lead to a new radicalization, both in Europe and across the Islamic world, whereby more and more young Muslims would become holy warriors in an endless clash of civilizations. A consequent rise in anti-Semitism would then be the smallest problem.

Notes

Acknowledgments. This article appeared as papers presented at the University of Illinois, the University of Chicago, Cornell University, and the 2005 meeting of the American Ethnological Society. At these and other occasions, I received input and encouragement from Susan Buck-Morss, Dominic Boyer, John Bunzl, Ken Cano, Jane Fajans, Maryam D. Fernando, Susan Gal, Jessica Greenberg, Susannah Heschel, Tony Judt, Brett Kaplan, Brian Klug, Ellen Moodie, Andrea Mehelebach, Andy Orta, Esra Özürek, Rix-Ellen Prell, Doron Rabinovici, Michael Rothenberg, Tim Pilbrow, Michael Silverstein, Paul Silverstein, Adam Sutcliffe, Terence Turner, Billy Vaughan, and Yasemin Yildiz. I am grateful to all of them. I also want to thank Virginia Dominguez for her support and her decision to feature the article as part of an AE Forum and Linda Forman for her wonderful editorial work.

1. The EUMC has not been unresponsive to the critiques issued by U.S. Jewish organizations. For some time now, it has sought their collaboration in finding workable definitions for anti-Semitism. A first result of these efforts, one that is closer to the position of the U.S. organizations, was issued in May 2005 (EUMC 2005).

2. The conference of the Anti-Defamation League was held in New York in October and November 2002; the June 2003 conference of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) cited the position of the U.S. organizations, was issued in May 2005 (EUMC 2005).

3. The quote is from Harald Ofner, who made the comment on November 14 during a discussion program on Austrian television.

4. In a stunning political development, Austria’s Freedom Party split into two factions in April of 2005. The secession occurred during a discussion program on Austrian television. I was led by Haider himself, who, in the wake of a falling-out with a group of more traditional nationalists, left the Freedom Party to found the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (Alliance Future Austria). Of the Freedom Party’s leading politicians, a large majority followed Haider, including all of the ministers in the governing coalition (which is now a coalition between the People’s Party and Alliance Future Austria). Given the ongoing confusion of the situation, it is too early to foresee the long-term effects of the split. A reunification is quite possible (similar developments have taken place in the Freedom Party’s past) but so is an end of parliamentary representation, especially of the rump party that is the current Freedom Party, following the 2006 general elections.

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Die Gemeinde


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World Jewish Congress

accepted February 15, 2005
final version submitted April 6, 2005

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