

Open Letter to Emmanuel Macron: Anti-Zionism is not “the reinvented form of antisemitism”

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Israeli historian Shlomo Sand responds to Emmanuel Macron’s speech in front of Benjamin Netanyahu, in commemoration of the 1942 Vel d’Hiv round-up of Jews. “Has this former student of philosophy, Paul Ricœur’s assistant, read so few history books that he does not know that many Jews or descendants of Jewish heritage have always opposed Zionism, without this making them anti-Semites?”

As I began reading your speech on the commemoration of the Vel d’Hiv round-up [[1](#)], I felt grateful toward you. Indeed, in the light of the long tradition of political leaders, both Left and Right, past and present, who have denied France’s participation and responsibility in the deportation of Jewish-origin people to the death camps, I was grateful that you instead took a clear position, without any ambiguity: yes, France is responsible for the deportation, yes there was anti-Semitism in France before and after the Second World War. Yes, we must continue to fight all forms of racism. I saw these positions as standing in continuity with the courageous statement you made in Algeria, saying that colonialism constitutes a crime against humanity.

But to be wholly frank, I was rather annoyed by the fact that you invited Benjamin Netanyahu. He should without doubt be ranked in the category of oppressors, and so he cannot parade himself as a representative of the victims of yesteryear. Of course, I have long known the impossibility of separating memory from politics. Perhaps you were deploying a sophisticated strategy, still yet to be revealed, aimed at contributing to the realisation of an equitable compromise in the Middle East?

I stopped being able to understand you when, in the course of your speech, you stated that “Anti-Zionism ... is the reinvented form of anti-Semitism.” Was this statement intended to please your guest, or is it purely and simply a marker of a lack of political culture? Has this former student of philosophy, Paul Ricœur’s assistant, read so few history books that he does not know that many Jews or descendants of Jewish heritage have always opposed Zionism, without this making them anti-Semites? Here I am referring to almost all the old grand rabbis, but also the stances taken by a section of contemporary orthodox Judaism. And I also remember figures like Marek Edelman, one of the escaped leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, or the communists of Jewish background who took part in the French Resistance in the Manouchian group, in which they perished. I also think of my friend and teacher Pierre Vidal-Naquet and of other great historians and sociologists like Eric Hobsbawm and Maxime Rodinson, whose writings and whose memory are so dear to me, or indeed Edgar Morin. And finally I wonder if you seriously expect of the Palestinians that they should not be anti-Zionists!

Nonetheless, I suppose that you do not particularly appreciate people on the Left, or, perhaps, the Palestinians. But knowing that you worked at Rothschild Bank, I will here provide a quote from Nathan Rothschild. President of the union of synagogues in Britain, he was the first Jew to be named

a lord in the United Kingdom, where he also became the bank's governor. In a 1903 letter to Theodor Herzl, the talented banker wrote that he was anxious about plan to establish a "Jewish colony"; it "would be a ghetto within a ghetto with all the prejudices of a ghetto." A Jewish state "would be small and petty, Orthodox and illiberal, and keep out non-Jews and the Christians." We might conclude that Rothschild's prophecy was mistaken. But one thing is for sure: he was no anti-Semite!

Of course, there have been, and there are, some anti-Zionists who are also anti-Semites, but I am also certain that we could find anti-Semites among the sycophants of Zionism. I can also assure you that a number of Zionists are racists whose mental structure does not differ from that of utter Judeophobes: they relentlessly search for a Jewish DNA (even at the university that I teach at).

But to clarify what an anti-Zionist point of view is, it is important to begin by agreeing on the definition of the concept "Zionism," or at the very least, a series of characteristics proper to this term. I will endeavor to do so as briefly as possible.

First of all, Zionism is not Judaism. It even constitutes a radical revolt against it. Across the centuries, pious Jews nurtured a deep ardour for their holy land, and more particularly for Jerusalem. But they held to the Talmudic precept intimating that they should not collectively emigrate there before the coming of the Messiah. Indeed, the land does not belong to the Jews, but to God. God gave and God took away again; and he would send the Messiah to restore it, when he wanted to. When Zionism appeared it removed the "All Powerful" from his place, substituting the active human subject in his stead.

We can each give our own view on the question of whether the project of creating an exclusive Jewish state on a slice of land with a very large Arab-majority population is a moral idea. In 1917 Palestine counted 700,000 Arab Muslims and Christians and around 60,000 Jews, half of whom were opposed to Zionism. Up till that point, the mass of the Yiddish-speaking people who wanted to flee the pogroms of the Russian Empire preferred to migrate to the American continent. Indeed, two million made it there, thus escaping Nazi persecution (and the persecution under the Vichy regime).

In 1948 in Palestine there were 650,000 Jews and 1.3 million Arab Muslims and Christians, 700,000 of whom became refugees. It was on this demographic basis that the State of Israel was born. Despite that, and against the backdrop of the extermination of the European Jews, a number of anti-Zionists reached the conclusion that in the name of avoiding the creation of fresh tragedies it was best to consider the State of Israel as an irreversible *fait accompli*. A child born as the result of a rape does indeed have the right to live. But what happens if this child follows in the footsteps of his father?

And then came 1967. Since then Israel has ruled over 5.5 million Palestinians, who are denied civil, political and social rights. Israel subjects them to military control: for part of them a sort of "Indian reservation" in the West Bank, while others are locked up in a "barbed wire holding pen" in Gaza (70% of the population there are refugees or their descendants). Israel, which constantly proclaims its desire for peace, considers the territories conquered in 1967 as an integral part of the "land of Israel," and it behaves there as it sees fit. Thus far 600,000 Jewish-Israeli settlers have been moved in there... and this has still not ended!

Is that today's Zionism? No!, reply my friends on the Zionist Left — which is constantly shrinking. They tell me that we have to put an end to the dynamic of Zionist colonisation, that a narrow little Palestinian state should be created next to the State of Israel, and that Zionism's objective was to establish a state where the Jews would be sovereign over themselves, and not to conquer "the ancient homeland" in its entirety. And the most dangerous thing in all this, in their eyes, is that

annexing territory threatens Israel's character as a Jewish state.

So here we reach the proper moment for me to explain to you why I am writing to you, and why I define myself as non-Zionist or anti-Zionist, without thereby becoming anti-Jewish. Your political party has put the words "La République" in its name. So I presume that you are a fervent republican. And, at the risk of surprising you: I am, too. So being a democrat and a republican I cannot — as all Zionists do, Left and Right, without exception — support a Jewish State. The Israeli Interior Ministry counts 75% of the country's citizens as Jewish, 21% as Arab Muslims and Christians and 4% as "others" (sic). Yet according to the spirit of its laws, Israel does not belong to Israelis as a whole, whereas it does belong even to all those Jews worldwide who have no intention of coming to live there. So for example, Israel belongs a lot more to Bernard Henri-Lévy or to Alain Finkielkraut than it does to my Palestinian-Israeli students, Hebrew speakers who sometimes speak it better than I do! Israel hopes that the day will come when all the people of the CRIF ("Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France") and their "supporters" emigrate there! I even know some French anti-Semites who are delighted by such a prospect. On the other hand, we could find two Israeli ministers close to Netanyahu putting out the idea that it is necessary to encourage the "transfer" of Israeli Arabs, without that meaning that anyone demanded their resignations.

That, Mr. President, is why I cannot be a Zionist. I am a citizen who desires that the state he lives in should be an Israeli Republic, and not a Jewish-communalist state. As a descendant of Jews who suffered so much discrimination, I do not want to live in a state that, according to its own self-definition, makes me a privileged class of citizen. Mr. President, do you think that that makes me an anti-Semite?

P.S.

* <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3323-open-letter-to-emmanuel-macron>

* Translated from French by David Broder.

Footnotes

[1] In 1942 there was a mass arrest of over 13,000 Jews by the French police, people who would shortly afterwards be transported to Auschwitz:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vel%27_d%27Hiv_Roundup