

# Strange bedfellows: Islamophobia, antisemitism, and central Europe's fascination with Israel

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**In the summer of 2017, I took a group of students and artists to a town in northeastern Poland called Suwałki, close to the Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Russian (Kaliningrad) borders. In this historically multiethnic, multireligious region, it is not uncommon for Jewish, Muslim, and various Christian cemeteries to stand side-by-side, on the same plot of land, as is the case in Suwałki. They mark a long history of intercultural co-existence in what is now one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in Europe.**

In my work as a Jewish cultural studies tour organizer, I'm accustomed to seeing broken beer bottles, wantonly toppled headstones, and the occasional scrawled swastika in the remains of Jewish cemeteries across central and eastern Europe. In Suwałki that summer, I noticed that the same chalk was used to produce the same racist symbols and slogans at the entryways to both the Jewish and Tatar Muslim cemeteries.

That same year, [one poll](#) found that 51 per cent of respondents would rather see Poland leave the European Union than accept refugees from predominantly Muslim countries. Against the backdrop of the right-wing Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) party's rise to power, Poland saw both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim rhetoric, marches, and legislation grow. This is more broadly the case in what is known as the [Visegrad Group](#) (V4) — an alliance of central European EU member states Poland, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia, united by their opposition to refugee intake quotas set by the EU. While some right-wing populist administrations in the region have amped up their racist scapegoating of Jews and Muslims, they have simultaneously built strong geopolitical relationships with the state of Israel.

This article looks at the relationship between contemporary antisemitism and Islamophobia in these spaces, focusing specifically on Poland and Hungary. It also explores the related and ostensibly contradictory process wherein these states have tightened their international partnership with Israel on the one hand, while presenting anti-Jewish hatred at home on the other.

## **Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and the right**

Since the [refugee crisis](#) began in Europe in 2015, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing populist Fidesz party have mounted an Islamophobic assault on refugees and migrants seeking passage to the EU. Their claims about Muslims are familiar around the world, including ideas about religious fundamentalism, terrorism, and cultural incompatibility; as well as drawing on local historical narratives in which Hungary was both occupied by, and a bulwark against, the Ottoman Empire between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although Hungary received a high proportion of asylum applications between 2010 and 2016 compared with applications to neighboring countries, [less than 0.4 per cent](#) of the Hungarian population today is Muslim.

In the leadup to the 2018 Hungarian elections, Orbán famously ran a billboard campaign that read “Don’t let George Soros have the last laugh,” featuring the Hungarian-American philanthropist of Jewish origins. The billboards reference Soros’ liberal position on the refugee crisis in Europe. At the time, Orbán issued a statement [that said](#) “The person who uses his wealth, power, influence and a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) funded by him to settle millions of migrants in Hungary and the European Union puts our future in jeopardy. The billionaire speculator George Soros has made it quite clear repeatedly that this is precisely what he wants to do.” The antisemitic overture is obvious — across the globe, Soros is the right’s stand-in for a shadowy cabal of wealthy Jews who run the world’s finances, governments, and civil society institutions. The billboards were often defaced with the words “stinking Jew.” [1]

[Orbán](#) has also worked to rehabilitate wartime figures like Miklós Horthy, who ruled Hungary between 1920 and 1944, as national heroes. In an attempt to wrest Horthy’s memory away from his collaboration with the Nazis, anti-Jewish laws, and deportations during the Holocaust, Orbán founded a new research institute to develop alternative portrayals of the admiral. Orbán also opened his own Holocaust museum designed to downplay instances of local complicity in anti-Jewish violence. The museum was later handed to the conservative Jewish religious organization Chabad after backlash over the museum’s lack of Jewish consultation. In 2019 his government [stripped](#) official status from two progressive Jewish congregations.

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In Poland, the story is similar. PiS is staunchly anti-immigrant. In 2020 the government refused to accept any refugees from its mandated EU quota, over which the European Court of Justice ruled that Poland (as well as Hungary and Czechia) had [violated EU law](#). Even before the recent plight of Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion, Poland was preventing hundreds of asylum seekers stranded at the [Belarusian border](#) from crossing into the EU and continues to do so. Nationalist demonstrations feature the same Islamophobic, anti-migrant fantasies as in Hungary (and the rest of the non-Muslim world) about security threats, religious takeover, and social collapse. Less than 0.1 per cent of Poland’s population is Muslim. According to [UNHCR data](#), there was a combined total of 17,415 refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people living in Poland in 2020 — around 0.05 per cent of the total population.

These marches almost always feature antisemitic imagery as well. In November 2021 in the central Polish city of [Kalisz](#), the far right joined Independence Day demonstrations with [chants including](#) “death to Jews” and famously burned a copy of the 13<sup>th</sup> century document that granted Jews historic protections and rights in Poland. PiS publicly condemned the overt displays of antisemitism, but it is actually a partner of, not an impediment to, the far right and fascist forces in Poland in their scapegoating of Jews.

During president Andrzej Duda’s re-election campaign in 2020, PiS leader Jarosław [Kaczyński](#) [accused](#) opposition candidate and liberal mayor of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski of supporting property restitution for Holocaust survivors. Poland is the only post-Soviet EU member state not to have passed Jewish property restitution legislation. Polish state television made similar overtures, asking Trzaskowski whether he intended to “fulfill Jewish demands” if elected. According to Kaczyński “only someone without a Polish soul, a Polish heart and a Polish mind could say something like that. Mr. Trzaskowski clearly doesn’t have these, seeing as he says that this is open to discussion.” Here, the antisemitic contention that Jews and their allies are disloyal fifth columns trying to access wealth is clear. The implication is also that these categories are mutually exclusive: Jews cannot be considered Poles, and nor can Poles be regarded as Jews.

One of PiS's key nationalism-galvanizing campaigns is around [Poland's role](#) in the Second World War. We see echoes of the same discussion in the Hungarian Holocaust museum example cited above. They do not deny that the Holocaust occurred, but they insist that there can be no Polish responsibility for it, since Poland itself did not exist as an independent state during the Nazi occupation and its government operated in exile rather than as a collaborator. In fact, in 2018, PiS made it illegal to blame Poland for Holocaust crimes. In this line of thinking, Germany and the Soviet Union are the sole perpetrators of 20<sup>th</sup> century violence in Europe, concentration and death camps on Polish soil were exclusively German-run, and Poles exist only among the Second World War's victims (or even its primary victims).

There is no question that Poles suffered unspeakable violence during the war. But this narrative of exclusive victimhood is part of a regional [Holocaust revisionism](#) trend among right-wing parties in post-socialist states that had significant Jewish populations before the war. There is [an attempt](#) by the right in Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and Lithuania in particular to downplay local collaboration in the Holocaust (whether at the state or grassroots level) while rehabilitating local wartime leaders as national heroes for the present. In countries that were occupied by the Soviet Union before the Nazis arrived, instances of collaboration are viewed and justified as part of an independence struggle against the Soviets — who are often compared to the Nazis as [equally bad](#), if not worse.

What is more, this narrative construes Jews as communists or communist collaborators, and therefore enemies of independence and oppressors of their respective nation states. At its worst, the narrative implies that Jews “had it coming,” or, at the very least, were perpetrators as much as victims. This is a convenient way for right-wing parties in central and eastern Europe today to whip up nationalist and xenophobic support while dodging conversations about the crimes of their political forebears. They use a combination of an old enemy (Jews) and a new one (Muslims) to sustain their political project.

It's no accident that Orbán's attack on Soros is not only that he is a wealthy Jew, but a wealthy Jew who is filling Europe with Muslims. In other words, Jews and Muslims are in cahoots to [destroy](#) Europe. A Pew Research poll found that when anti-Muslim racism rose, so did antisemitism — among the very same people. For right-wing populists, Euro-fascists, and neo-Nazis, these two forms of racism are [mutually reinforcing](#). Antisemitic conspiracies about worldwide Jewish domination help the right explain systemic crises, and locate a source for people's sense of impoverishment and social dislocation. It also provides cover for anti-democratic, authoritarian measures, and the violence necessary to enforce them, by casting liberal democracy as another nefarious Jewish plot. Jews operate as an external, international menace.

Islamophobia endows right-wing forces with another threat to rally around, although this time without the institutional power they project onto Jews. Although they persist in some ways, narratives of a Jewish enemy within are harder to sustain today, when so few Jews remain in central and eastern Europe compared with their pre-war populations. To be sure, Muslim communities in these countries are infinitesimally small, but they are easily transformed into a potential internal threat to national identity, particularly on the eastern periphery of the EU that serves as a buffer for wealthier western European countries that refugees seek to reach. This taps into and fuels contemporary anxieties around demographic change, religious difference, and resource allocation. When these movements, parties, and governments cannot deliver substantive life improvements to their base, they have two ready-made, intertwined scapegoats in the wings.

Although antisemitism and Islamophobia have particular and alarming local manifestations in the far-right corners of central and eastern Europe, it is important to note that these are not problems endemic to this region alone. Sometimes xenophobia is viewed as a special problem localized to central and eastern Europe. Although there are indeed local lineages of anti-Ottoman and anti-Tatar

Islamophobia in the region, the dominant form of contemporary Islamophobia does not originate here. It is a Western [import](#) rooted in imperialism and the war on terror. In tandem with growing Islamophobia, antisemitism regularly rears its ugly head across rising far right organizations and parties in the West — where [violent attacks](#) on Jews are [more likely](#) to happen than in the east.

These are also not issues confined to the political right. Centrist and liberal political parties across Europe and the West have spent two decades building an Islamophobic consensus, opening space and creating legitimacy for the right to capitalize on the scapegoating. Even worse, Islamophobia has a liberal wing as well, which often uses the language of secularism and women's rights to demonize and ostracize Muslims. Centrists and liberals who use racist dog-whistles that target Muslims make it all the more acceptable for the right to do the same even more overtly among any marginalized group. In turn, when "respectable" parliamentary forces of the far right peddle these ideas, it is not only designed to galvanize support among a wide popular base, but also signals to hardened neo-Nazis and their violence is welcome in the discourse and on the streets.

### **Israel: model and partner**

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Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, [Hungary](#), and recently to a lesser degree, Poland, are among Israel's staunchest geopolitical allies. For these Eurosceptic administrations, Israel is both a [model](#) and a partner. Central and eastern European nationalisms share common features with Zionism — indeed their movements were all born in the same places. In fact, antisemitism and Zionism agree on one crucial thing: states should represent a geographically concentrated and homogenous nation. By implication, the logical extension of both antisemitism and today's dominant form of Zionism is that Jews never belonged in Europe in the first place. Israel has achieved the goal of interwar central and eastern European nationalist movements (albeit as a settler-colonial state in Palestine rather than in Europe where the vast majority of Jews, Poles, and Hungarians lived respectively before the Second World War). It created a state for Jews in the same way Hungarians and Poles sought to do before and during the devastation of the Nazi invasion, followed (and sometimes also preceded) quickly by decades of Soviet alignment and occupation.

Orbán in particular is a [great admirer](#) both of Israel in general and of the country's right-wing former president Benjamin Netanyahu. He appreciates Israel's model of ethnocracy which protects and elevates its titular Jewish population to the exclusion of Palestinians, while being solidly integrated into global capitalism and enjoying comparatively high living standards. Eastern Europe, by contrast, is the fastest shrinking region in the world, with lower birth rates and many choosing to leave for better economic opportunities abroad. For right-wing parties in central and eastern Europe, Israel is a success story in demographic maintenance through both high birth rates and courting Jews living in the diaspora. But as [Matan Kaminer](#) has pointed out in this publication, economic realities mean central and eastern states cannot simply replicate an Israeli model. Unlike in Israel's relationship with Palestine, central and eastern European states have neither the ability to expropriate another country's land nor exploit its labor—to say nothing of the unique and unsurpassed US imperialist backing and financing that has made Israeli economic development possible. Nevertheless, the admiration persists.

The feeling is, by and large, mutual. Until his recent ousting, Netanyahu pursued a close relationship with the V4 countries on Israel's behalf. They share a common frustration with the EU's edicts— for the V4 countries it concerns immigration quotas, while Israel objects to the EU's (occasional and

soft) condemnations of its human rights record in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In 2019 Hungary, Czechia, and Romania [blocked](#) an EU statement that criticized then-president Donald Trump's plan to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, widely understood as a denial of the Palestinian claim to the city as a capital. The year before, Hungary abstained from a UN General Assembly vote over the same issue. About this Netanyahu [said](#) "you have stood up for Israel time and time again in international forums. It is deeply appreciated, and it is important." Orbán responded that "a Hungarian patriot and a Jewish Israeli patriot will always find something in common."

Apparently out of deference to Israel, during his 2018 trip Orbán declined [to visit](#) Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, the standard EU practice for diplomatic visits to Israel-Palestine. During that same visit, Netanyahu added that both countries "understand that the threat of radical Islam is a real one." Something that Netanyahu and Orbán agree on is the conflation of "Palestinian" and "radical Islam;" in their Islamophobic worldview, these are one and the same. A year prior to this visit, Hungary [discussed](#) purchasing Israeli security fences to keep refugees and migrants out.

It's not difficult to see why Hungarian and Israeli political elites share perspectives on Islam and migration. What is more complicated to unravel is Israel's relationship with Fidesz and PiS's antisemitism. While domestic policy draws on a long lineage of anti-Jewish hatred, foreign policy tilts toward Israel for a number of [strategic reasons](#).

For leaders like Orbán, antisemitism is not so much a matter of principle, but a strategy for maintaining and creating a popular base. For Israel and the strands of Zionism that are now dominant, opposition to antisemitism is not a matter of principle either. They can tolerate a certain amount of domestic anti-Jewish policy and rhetoric in their ally countries, as long as it does not interfere with Israel's wider geopolitical interests.

When the above-mentioned election billboards featuring Soros were released, Hungarian state secretary Takács Szabolcs defended Orbán, [explaining](#) how Fidesz is "funding an institute to research anti-Semitism [sic] and combat anti-Israel sentiments among radical leftist and Islamic circles." Apparently this was a sufficient defense. Initially the Israeli embassy [condemned](#) the campaign, but within hours the foreign ministry backtracked, [stating](#): "In no way was the statement by the ambassador meant to delegitimize criticism of George Soros, who continuously undermines Israel's democratically elected governments by funding organizations that defame the Jewish state and seek to deny it the right to defend itself." In other words, they agree with Fidesz's characterization of Soros. In fact, it was Netanyahu himself that [introduced](#) Orbán to the campaign strategists that would go on to mastermind the early iterations of Fidesz's anti-Soros offensive.

Israel's tolerance of such behavior is, of course, not limitless. Poland's outright and public Holocaust revisionism and PiS's hostility to Jewish property restitution has recently [sour](#)ed diplomatic relations between the two states. Yet Israel remains closely tied with Hungary. This suggests that the main issue Israel takes with Polish Holocaust revisionism is a matter of optics and degree. It is not hard to imagine that if it were coded more carefully and traded for greater support for Israel in other ways, that Israel would re-commit to its relationship with PiS. It remains to be seen how easily these fences will be mended, and on what grounds.

## Conclusions

The overlapping and intertwined relationship between antisemitism and Islamophobia in central and eastern Europe is complex and thorny to unravel. It currently exists in the shadow of the Holocaust. It is complicated more by right-wing regimes in the region's friendly relationships with Israel. Israel's insistence that anti-Zionism is antisemitic confuses the issue even more, making it difficult to parse out what is racism and what is not, let alone develop strategies against either or both forms of

intertwined racism.

Every context is different and there can be no cookie-cutter strategy for confronting these questions. Lefteast's [statement](#) in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle released in May 2021 was a welcome and necessary initiative that began to parse out some of these issues, expressing solidarity not only with Palestinians under siege and occupation, but also voicing and strategizing around the complicity of central and eastern European states in both antisemitic and anti-Muslim violence. It is essential to interrogate our own governments' cynical use of antisemitism while they simultaneously pursue greater cooperation with Israel, and to build a regional and global discourse that can stand unequivocally against both antisemitism and Islamophobia while critiquing every form of ethnocracy and imperialism, including Zionism.

I began with the antisemitic, Islamophobic graffiti at the cemetery gates in Suwałki, the historically multiethnic town now situated in the northeastern part of the contemporary Republic of Poland. In his series of essays originally published between 1920 and 1955 (compiled in the original Yiddish in 1958 and presented in [English translation](#) in 1999), Jewish educator, writer, and cultural activist Hirsz Abramowicz wrote about the deep interculturality of this region. His essay on rural occupations in and around Suwałki during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the First World War details how no part of social life in this region could function without the collaboration of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Imperfect, contradictory, and all but forgotten, this history is worth remembering in the face of the ethnic homogeneity politicians in Budapest, Warsaw, and Jerusalem strive to promulgate.

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## **P.S.**

Left East

<https://lefteast.org/strange-bedfellows-islamophobia-antisemitism-and-central-europes-fascination-with-israel/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See for example [this image](#) by Akos Stiller in the Independent.