

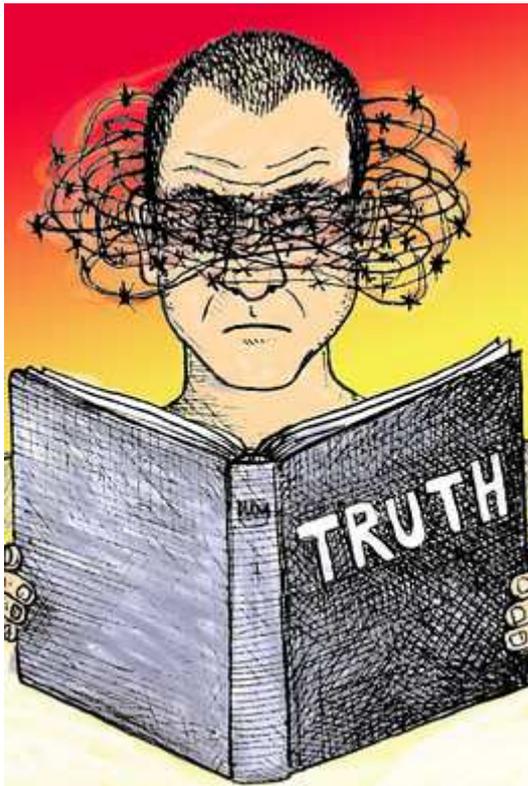
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'Islamophobia' or 'Truthophobia'?

Berlin's anti-Semitism center is going astray.

- By [MATTHIAS KÜNTZEL](#) | *From today's Wall Street Journal Europe (December 8, 2008)*

At a time when Jew haters in the Islamic world have become more assertive than ever, Berlin's Center for Research on Anti-Semitism is concentrating on a different group: the "new enemies of Islam."



Barbara Kelley

Who exactly belongs to this category is not clear from the center's latest publication, the "Yearbook for Research on Anti-Semitism." But the potential danger is supposedly known: "The fury of the new enemies of Islam is similar to the older rage of anti-Semites against the Jews," writes Prof. Wolfgang Benz, the institute's director. The center will present its new findings today at a conference in Berlin titled "Concepts of the Muslim Enemy -- Concepts of the Jewish Enemy."

It is certainly necessary to oppose the demonization of Muslims and discrimination against them, which often have racist motivations. The Berlin center, whose research covers prejudices in general, is right to address this issue. The problem lies in the way it is being done.

The Berlin center adopts the neologism "Islamophobia" without any reservation. This term is misleading because it mixes two different phenomena -- unjust hatred against Muslims and necessary criticism of political Islam -- and condemns both equally.

By accepting this vocabulary, the Berlin center reinforces an unfortunate trend. In May 2005, the Council of Europe -- at the urging of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- used the term for the first time, condemning "all forms of intolerance . . . including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia."

Yet this statement did not go far enough for the Muslim Council of Britain. "The fact is that Islamophobia has replaced anti-Semitism," explained Abduljalil Sajid, an imam and leading member of the Muslim Council, a month later at a conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Cordoba, Spain. He described as Islamophobic such statements as "Long live Israel!" and "Muslim fundamentalism is dangerous." Meanwhile, various documents by the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the United Nations have condemned Islamophobia as today's most important and worst form of prejudice.

The Center for Research on Anti-Semitism does not go this far. It is, though, surprising how naturally this institution of all places puts anti-Muslim sentiments and anti-Semitism in the same category. While both forms of prejudice should be fought, the differences between the "concept of the Muslim enemy" and the "concept of the Jewish enemy" are evident.

First, while racism usually makes people "small" in order to enslave, exploit or expel them, anti-Semitism makes the Jews delusionally "big." The most important characteristic of anti-Semitism is a conspiracy theory that holds the Jews responsible for both capitalism and communism, for AIDS, revolutions and financial crises -- in short, for every "inexplicable" catastrophe of modernity.

The concept of "redemptive anti-Semitism," coined by Holocaust scholar Saul Friedländer, describes this phenomenon: If one assumes the Jews are responsible for all the world's misery, only their extermination can "redeem" the world. This paradigm of Jew hatred does not apply to racism. Muslims are not accused of pulling the strings behind all revolutions and wars.

Second, while we must reject any general suspicion of Muslims, it is impossible to ignore the fact that reservations about Muslims are based on real mass murder committed by some Muslims in the name of Islam. Events such as 9/11 or the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh have no counterpart in Jewish tradition.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often used to explain Muslim hatred of Jews. But Israel's policies are not causing anti-Semitism. Rather, the way those policies are distorted and demonized in the Muslim world, and increasingly in Europe, is a new expression of this old hatred.

Third, one need not play down the extent of discrimination against Muslims in Europe to recognize that the effects of the "concept of the Muslim enemy" and the "concept of the Jewish enemy" are qualitatively different. No one wants to erase a Muslim country from the map the way some people threaten to do with the Jewish state. Islamic centers and houses of prayer need no permanent police protection in Europe, unlike Jewish sites. No satellite stations call for the extermination of Muslims, whereas Hezbollah and Hamas TV, for example, broadcast via Arab satellites into European living rooms, regularly call for the destruction of the Jews -- even on children's programs.

In taking up the fashionable vocabulary of Islamophobia and equating hostility to Muslims with hostility to Jews, the center also risks undermining the most important current task in dealing with anti-Semitism: studying and fighting hostility to Jews in the Islamic world, where anti-Semitism has reached an unprecedented level.

For example, one of the authors in the latest Yearbook, Jochen Müller, proposes a "revision of politics and history teaching" in German schools. Because the Holocaust has no "central meaning for migrants from the Arabic-Muslim world," one should consider whether "the colonial period and its consequences" would not be a better subject for "appropriate 'Holocaust education'" among Muslim students in Germany. This is a remarkable idea given the degree of Holocaust denial among many young Muslims.

Another article in the Yearbook, "Hostility to Islam on the World Wide Web," goes even further. Instead of criticizing anti-Semitism among Muslims, the author criticizes those who *accuse* Muslims of anti-Semitism. That's because such accusations provide "an apparently rationally based argument for rejecting an entire collective," writes Yasemin Shooman, a staff member at the center. Here, attempts to fight "hostility to Islam" threaten to turn into tolerance of anti-Semitic attitudes.

While the Berlin center concentrates on world-wide "anti-Islamic resentments," its Yearbook says not a word about the anti-Semitism of the Iranian mullahs. Thus, it hardly does justice to the demands for contemporary research on anti-Semitism. Never before has the elimination of the Jewish state been so loudly propagated. Never before has an influential power made Holocaust denial the center of its foreign policy, as Iran has today. Never before has a U.N. forum been misused for an anti-Semitic speech, as it was on Sept. 23 by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier criticized the speech as "blatantly anti-Semitic."

The Center for Research on Anti-Semitism, whose reports influence the work of the Bundestag, the federal government and the international community, should be expected to make anti-Semitism in the Middle East a focus of its work.

It is right that the past obligates us to combat all racism. But the experience of the Holocaust contains a second lesson: It obligates us to combat the temptation of "truthphobia" -- fear of the truth -- and to take literally the proclamations of anti-Semites, however crazy they may sound.

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