

## Israel's New-Found Friends

Written by Ronald Ranta

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RONALD RANTA, SEP 7 2011

*Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are!*

In the past – and until very recently – many young Europeans demonstrated their support for the State of Israel by volunteering in its Kibbutzim, marveling at its ‘socialist experiment’. Today they still come, though no longer to the Kibbutzim and no longer in support of the Jewish State. These days you are more likely to find them working for an NGO in Ramallah or demonstrating in Sheikh Jarrah for Palestinian rights.

The past few decades have seen a slow, yet unmistakable, change with regards to the international community’s support for Israel. One can pin-point the exact moment this change occurred to the end of the Six Day War. On the one hand, there has been a steady shift among centre-left and left (the radical-left was never sympathetic to the Zionist cause and viewed it as colonialism), especially in Europe, from moderate support or even admiration for the State of Israel (because of its ‘Socialist’ credentials and the fact that it was established a few years after the Holocaust), towards a feeling of uneasiness or even, in some cases, outright antagonism. On the other hand, among the centre-right and far-right the exact opposite has occurred. Today, some of these far-Right parties, especially in Western Europe, which are referred to by European main-stream media and even by European Jewry as Racist, Fascist, and Xenophobic, go out of their way to show support for the Jewish state: from Anti-Semites to Philo-Semites (though not with regards to non-Jewish Semites!), from Holocaust deniers to avid-Zionists.

Who currently identifies themselves as “friends” and “supporters” of the State of Israel? Who are these groups and movements that support Israel’s “right” to defend itself, its occupation and its settlement policies, its new restricting laws? Who stood by Israel during ‘Operation Cast Lead’ and the ‘Gaza Flotilla’?

In Britain, Nick Griffin, the leader of the BNP (British Nationalist Party), who has renounced Anti-Semitism (towards Jews at least), claims to be a friend and supporter of Israel and Zionism (Griffin supported Israel’s ‘right’ to defend itself during the ‘Gaza Flotilla’). The BNP’s own website claims to “supports the right of Israel to be Jewish. This ethno-nationalist concept is at the heart of the party’s desire to keep Britain British.” In the past, the French National Front and its former leader Jean-Marie Le Pen were synonymous with Anti-Semitism, Jewish conspiracy theories and Holocaust denial. Nowadays, Le Pen’s daughter, the party’s new leader, claims that the National Front has always supported Zionism and Israel’s right to exist. The head of the Austrian Freedom party (formerly headed by Nazi sympathiser Jorg Haider) Heinz-Christain Strache has recently visited Jewish settlements in the West Bank alongside other far-Right European politicians (from Belgium, Sweden, and Germany) in a show of solidarity with Israel’s settler movement. Last year, Israel’s Deputy Defense Minister Ayoob Kara caused a stir among European Jewry when he accepted an invitation at the behest of the Austrian Freedom party. Do not forget Holland: Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom, is open and vocal about his support and admiration for Israel referring to it as “the West’s first line of defense” (against whom, one might wonder?) and that “the Jihad against Israel is the Jihad against the West”. Regarding a Palestinian state Wilders stated that “It is not Israel’s duty to provide a Palestinian state. There already is a Palestinian state and that state is Jordan.”

It is true that Israel officially does not support or encourage these parties (though members of the ruling Coalition do). However, reading the statements coming from Israel’s foreign ministry of late, one might reach the conclusion that Israel shares this extreme and dangerous ideology of racism, hatred, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. This ideology of

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hatred, however, is not limited to the foreign ministry, but is shared and accepted by many in Israel. In a recent example, Israeli right-wing bloggers, referring to events in Norway, argued that Anders Breivik, the Norwegian fanatic who massacred dozens of innocent teenagers, was acting for a just cause (i.e. to free Europe of foreigners and Muslims), but used the wrong means. *Jerusalem Post*, a mainstream daily in English, took the opportunity of the massacre to argue in its editorial for a serious reevaluation of "policies for immigrant integration in Norway and elsewhere", reminding its readers that the Muslim population of Norway "is forecast to increase from 3 percent to 6.5% of the population by 2030". It is important to note that the *Jerusalem Post* later apologised for these comments.

While relations with its newly-found European supporters are still at their infancy, one can talk about Israel's relations with Evangelical-far-Right groups in the US as a blossoming relationship.

American Evangelical groups are by far Israel's biggest supporters in and outside the US. They have stood by Israel in recent years and have declared their support for its settler policies. These groups, who believe in the imminent-second-coming of Christ, the 'War of Armageddon', and the 'Rapture', have been Israel's and the settler groups' most vociferous supporters, both financially and politically. Whether they truly support the Jewish state (as they claim), or simply hope to advance their notion of the end-of-days (which is more likely, considering their Anti-Semitic statements), they have donated millions of dollars for the advancement and strengthening of the Israeli right and far-right, as well as for the spreading of Zionist ideology and values. Additionally, they have donated millions for the establishment and maintenance of settlements in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem.

One of the most important donors and biggest supporters, of the Israeli right, is the head of 'Christians United for Israel' the pastor John Hagee. Hagee has in the past come out with bizarre and ridiculous statements regarding Jews: from Hitler's Jewish heritage to explaining that Jews were persecuted throughout history for being insubordinate to God. Others, such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, have made similar Anti-Semitic statements, such as claiming the anti-Christ to be Jewish and alluding to Jewish financial control of the world. What these groups and individuals have in common with Israeli and European far-right parties is a rabid hatred of Islam, coupled with a xenophobic-ethnocentric world view. The main difference is the millennialist and messianic elements among Evangelicals.

Recent events have called into question Israel's shaky democratic credentials and nature: the Boycott-ban law; the proposed public investigation of left-wing NGOs; the government's handling of Rabbi Dov Lior and last year's Rabbis' Letter (calling on Israeli-Jews not to rent houses to non-Jews); and also 'minor' events such as the grand-welcoming Israel gave controversial former Fox News commentator Glenn Beck, who had previously made dubious statements regarding Jews (eluding that Jews killed Jesus and equating Israel's social protest movement with terrorism) and non-Jews (comparing massacred Norwegian teenagers to the Hitler Youth).

Some (especially among the European radical-left) have long argued that Israel is not a democracy but an apartheid state (the new South Africa), and that Zionism is not a movement of national liberation but an ideology of racism based on ethnocentrism and settler-colonialism. They argue that Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories are testament to that.

Today many of Israel's supporters and friends are groups advocating and believing in extreme, at times farfetched, ideas and theories, spreading hatred and intolerance. If one substitutes the words Islam/Muslims for Judaism/Jews (don't try this at home), the Nazi rhetoric of the 1930s becomes apparent. It is about time Israelis took a good long look at themselves and decide whether they want to be associated with these racist hate-mongering parties, that do nothing more than spread their new form of virulent anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia. Whether Israel embraces or rejects these new-found friends will say much about the character and nature of its society and the direction it decides to take with regards to its future. Currently, this future does not seem very promising!

***Dr Ronald Ranta*** has taught the Arab-Israeli conflict at UCL, SOAS, and Kingston university. He is currently researching Israeli-Iranian relations during the period of the Shah. His research interest include: the Arab-Israeli conflict, food and nationalism, and Foreign Policy Analysis.

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