

## The uncomfortable truth about Swedish anti-semitism

By PAULINA NEUDINGDEC

New York Times (14.12.2017) - <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/14/opinion/sweden-antisemitism-jews.html> - This past Saturday, a Hanukkah party at a synagogue in Goteborg, Sweden, was abruptly interrupted by Molotov cocktails. They were [hurled by a gang of men](#) in masks at the Jews, mostly teenagers, who had gathered to celebrate the holiday.

Two days later, two fire bombs were discovered outside the Jewish burial chapel in the southern Swedish city of Malmo.

Who knows what tomorrow may bring?

For Sweden's 18,000 Jews, sadly, none of this comes as a surprise. They are by now used to anti-Semitic threats and attacks — especially during periods of unrest in the Middle East, which provide cover to those whose actual goal has little to do with Israel and much to do with harming Jews.

Both of these recent attacks followed days of incitement against Jews. Last Friday, 200 people protested in Malmo against President Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The protesters [called for an intifada](#) and promised "we will shoot the Jews." A day later, during a demonstration in Stockholm, [a speaker called](#) Jews "apes and pigs." There were promises of martyrdom.

Malmo's sole Hasidic rabbi has reported being the victim of [more than 100 incidents](#) of hostility ranging from hate speech to physical assault. In response to such attacks, the Simon Wiesenthal Center issued a travel warning in 2010 advising "extreme caution when visiting southern Sweden" because of officials' failure to act against the "serial harassment" of Jews in Malmo.

Today, entering a synagogue anywhere in Sweden usually requires going through security checks, including airport-like questioning. At times of high alert, police officers with machine guns guard Jewish schools. Children at the Jewish kindergarten in Malmo [play behind bulletproof glass](#). Not even [funerals](#) are safe from harassment.

Jewish schoolteachers have reported hiding their identity. A teacher who wouldn't even share the city where she teaches for fear of her safety [told a Swedish news outlet](#): "I hear students shouting in the hallway about killing Jews." Henryk Grynfeld, a teacher at a high school in a mostly immigrant neighborhood in Malmo, [was told by a student](#): "We're going to kill all Jews." He said other students yell "yahoud," the Arabic word for Jew, at him.

A spokesman for Malmo's Jewish community put the situation starkly. You "don't want to display the Star of David around your neck," he said. Or as spokesman for the Goteborg synagogue put it, "It's a constant battle to live a normal life, and not to give in to the threats, but still be able to feel safe."

The question that has dogged Jews throughout the centuries is now an urgent one for Sweden's Jewish community. Is it time to leave?

Some are answering yes. One reason is the nature of the current threat.

Historically, anti-Semitism in Sweden could mainly be attributed to right-wing extremists. While this problem persists, [a study from 2013](#) showed that 51 percent of anti-Semitic

incidents in Sweden were attributed to Muslim extremists. Only 5 percent were carried out by right-wing extremists; 25 percent were perpetrated by left-wing extremists.

Swedish politicians have no problem condemning anti-Semitism carried out by right-wingers. When neo-Nazis planned a march that would go past the Goteborg synagogue on Yom Kippur this September, for example, it stirred up outrage across the political spectrum. A court ruled that the demonstrators had to change their route.

There is, however, tremendous hesitation to speak out against hate crimes committed by members of another minority group in a country that prides itself on welcoming minorities and immigrants. In 2015, Sweden was second only to Germany in the number of Syrian refugees it welcomed. Yet the three men arrested in the Molotov cocktail attack were [newly arrived immigrants](#), two Syrians and a Palestinian.

The fear of being accused of intolerance has paralyzed Sweden's leaders from properly addressing deep-seated intolerance.

Some of the country's leaders have even used Israel as a convenient boogeyman to explain violence. After the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, Sweden's foreign minister, Margot Wallstrom, explained radicalism among European Muslims with reference to Israel: "Here, once again, we are brought back to situations like the one in the Middle East, where not least, the Palestinians see that there isn't a future. We must either accept a desperate situation or resort to violence."

In an interview in June, Prime Minister Stefan Lofven [was asked](#) whether Sweden had been naïve about the link between immigration and anti-Semitism. His response was typical of the way in which leading politicians have avoided giving straight answers about the threat against the country's Jews: "We have a problem in Sweden with anti-Semitism, and it doesn't matter who expresses it, it's still as darn wrong."

But the problem has grown so dire that it finally forced Mr. Lofven to admit in an interview this month: "We will not ignore the fact that many people have come here from the Middle East, where anti-Semitism is a widespread idea, almost part of the ideology. We must become even clearer, dare to talk more about it."

He's right. Unfortunately, the country's news media is often unable to speak plainly about the issue.

Two years ago, Sweden's biggest newspaper, Aftonbladet, [published a column](#) that ridiculed the notion that Jews were talking of leaving the country because of anti-Semitism, dismissing it as "lying" and "hysteria," and scoffing at the "especially cool" machine guns that police officers use when protecting Jewish schools. The same newspaper [accused Israel of harvesting Palestinian organs](#) in 2009 — the modern equivalent of the blood libel.

On Dec. 6, Sweden's state TV attributed President Trump's announcement on Jerusalem to the supposed extreme strength of the so-called Jewish lobby in the United States. The channel later apologized. TT, Sweden's leading news agency, cited "influential Jewish donors" in its analysis of the move. "Attack against synagogue linked to Trump," was the headline chosen by Swedish Metro to explain the fire bomb attack in Goteborg.

There are many areas in which Israel deserves criticism, but the Swedish press often crosses the line into vilification of the Jewish state and regularly insinuates that events in the Middle East are directed by powerful Jews in the West. This risks stoking already dangerously high anti-Jewish sentiment.

What can be done?

For starters, there are growing demands from Sweden's Jewish organizations for the state to do more to protect them. These days, Jewish institutions rely heavily on member fees and their own security organizations for protection. But keeping citizens safe is a basic job of the government.

It is also vital for Sweden to adopt a coherent strategy to combat radical Islamism. The country has become one of Europe's richest recruiting grounds for Islamic State fighters. Five people were killed in an Islamist attack in downtown Stockholm in April, and Swedish Islamists have been involved in other deadly attacks in Europe, including in Paris and Brussels.

One aspect of this strategy must be for the authorities to regain control over immigrant neighborhoods, where organized crime is rampant. In addition, Sweden has had a laissez-faire attitude toward religious schools, tax-funded through a voucher system. This has allowed extremists to exert influence over the minds of young people. Taxpayers shouldn't have to fund radicalization.

The government should also do more to counter attempts by foreign clerics to radicalize its Muslim community with a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, including the insidious idea that the Holocaust is a lie. In Sweden, as in other European countries, radicalization of Muslims is often funded and organized by foreign entities.

None of these efforts can be successful, however, without openly acknowledging the nature of modern anti-Semitism in Sweden.

During his state visit to Sweden in 2013, President Barack Obama didn't hesitate to call out the country's anti-Semitism problem. Speaking at Stockholm's main synagogue, he included a subtle but unmistakable criticism of the attitude among Swedish politicians: "We will stand against anti-Semitism and hatred, in all its forms." Swedish leaders should heed his words.

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