**Anti semitism?**

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If anyone wants to call anyone names, be precise. At least, that’s what one expects from those considered educated!

During an interview concerning the recent Israeli attack on Gaza, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi told CNN anchor, Bianna Golodryga, that Israel was losing “the media war, despite (its) connections.” The anchor then asked the Pakistani leader to explain those “connections.” “They [Israel] are very influential people,” Qureshi responded, “I mean, they control the media.” The CNN anchor Golodryga shot back, “I would call that an anti-semitic remark.”

The accusation of a person being anti-semitic or of the remarks he/she has made has become a common way of knocking down any argument that could be made in dealing with the state of Israel and the related conflict with Palestinians. It has cost many a politician his political career. In Germany, with its history of Fascism and Holocaust, any critical remark, however casual, is punished with the label of anti-semitism and draws inevitably expulsion from the elected office in party, parliament or otherwise. British Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and many others have faced the same accusations. By effectively preventing or debasing any critic of Israel or a real debate of the Middle East conflict that has been haunting both the region and the world has been prevented. This is a major hindrance to working out its solution. In a way, it means that the injustice that Jews have brutally and horrifically suffered during the Holocaust in Germany (and elsewhere in Europe) gives Israel the inviolable right to do the same to the Palestinians.

Racial classification is a result of the west-European Enlightenment that developed after the 18th century: a new worldview that speculated about development and progress postulated the equality of men but then started dissecting mankind into races, attaching certain characteristics to them. In the 18th century, the term began to refer to physical (phenotypical) traits. For instance, while John Stuart Mill in his essay on democracy explained how democracy would give equal rights to all, he never thought that the same applied to the black and brown races of the British colonial Empire. Until today, Europe and the larger West are unable to critically deal with race and attached characteristics as well as its follow-up in colonialism and “white man’s burden.” Modern science regards race as a social construct; an identity that is assigned based on rules made by society. While partially based on physical similarities within groups, race does not have an inherent physical or biological meaning.

Today, the term “semitic” holds no formal validity because the very idea of race was rejected after WW II

The term “Semitic” in a racial sense was a term for a racial and cultural group that was popular in the 19th and 20th centuries. Gaining prominence outside scholarly considerations and peaking in fascist ideology. The word Semite gives the false impression that antisemitism is directed against all Semitic people, including Arabs, Assyrians and Arameans. First used in print in Germany in 1879 as a scientific-sounding term for Judenhass (‘Jew-hatred’), it is now commonly used. Today, it holds no formal validity because the very idea of race was rejected after WW-II, for instance as a part of the Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO, adopted on November 16, 1945. In 1978, UNESCO adopted a “Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice” that precluded any kind of discrimination based on race and cultural behaviour. Scientifically, it has been proven through genetic inquiries that there are no “clean races” and the genes that provide for the difference in looks (facial features, skin colour and others) are but a minor variation of the genetic stock of men. Most importantly, all of mankind shares most of its genetic pool. That is why the terms Semites, Semitic peoples or Semitic cultures are now largely obsolete outside the grouping of “Semitic languages.” Now, Semitic languages are a branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family that originated in the Middle East. They are spoken by more than 330 million people across much of West Asia and North Africa. The largest group is Arabic, spoken by about 300 million people. Hebrew, spoken by about five million people, is a Semitic language as well. Thus, an educated person referring to someone as “semitic” or “anti-semitic” can in his right mind only refer to the language grouping of the person targeted, which would include Arabs and Jews alike. But that defies the purpose of the accusation, which, as a matter of fact, is meaningless.

Antisemitism is hostility to, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews. A person who holds such positions is called an antisemite. Antisemitism is generally considered to be a form of racism. It is mostly manifested by expressions of hatred or discrimination against individual Jews but may refer to organised pogroms by mobs or police forces, or even military attacks on entire Jewish communities. Notable instances of persecution include the Rhineland massacres preceding the First Crusade in 1096, the Edict of Expulsion from England in 1290, the 1348–1351 persecution of Jews during the Black Death, the massacres of Spanish Jews in 1391, the persecutions of the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Cossack massacres in Ukraine from 1648 to 1657, various anti-Jewish pogroms in the Russian Empire between 1821 and 1906, the 1894–1906 Dreyfus affair in France, the Holocaust in German-occupied Europe during World War II, Soviet anti-Jewish policies, and lastly, in the recent past, Arab and Muslim involvement in the Jewish exodus from Arab and Muslim countries. Please note that the exodus only started from the Muslim countries after the post-WW-I Balfour Declaration in contrast to the cruelties inflicted on Jews by Christians for several hundred centuries.

Then, what are we talking about? There is a long history of prejudices against Jews in Europe and beyond. Jews have been identified over the centuries by their religion and not by their race – a term that came up much later. The religious preoccupation against Jews in Christian West and Muslim East is exactly that: an expression of the fight between the new religions of the Christian church and Islam against the older, once predominant religion. Both Christianity and Islam consider all of humanity as their potential clients and are natural competitors to each other and the older religions. Thus, if expressing preoccupations against Jews at all, it would be much more correct to call such attitudes anti-Jewish or anti-Judaist. But Muslims and Christians are not a homogenous group and neither are Jews, many of whom are not very religious today.

Considering the history of Islam, while the genetic stock of all the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, including that of Jews and Arabs, was the same, it was only their religion (and connectedly, their culture) that differed. Many of the early Muslims must have been converts from Judaism as most of the Christians also had Jewish roots. Leopold Weiss, an Austrian Jew, better known as Muhammad Asad, is one of the later converts to Islam. Islam and the Quran refer to Jews explicitly and certainly admonition about how insincere conversions to Islam could be connected to Jews – among others. But at no point did the Prophet (PBUH) condemn all Jews as a group. In the “Charter of Medina,” he had explicitly aligned his state with them and acknowledged them as equal citizens with equal rights and obligations. We are reminded to respect all prophets–a fundamental part of Islam– five times every day. While offering prayers, we ask God “My God, bless Muhammad (PBUH) and Muhammad’s (PBUH) family as you blessed Abraham and Abraham’s family.”

Thus, while the existence of anti-Jewish feelings cannot be denied, such behaviour is not based on any valid racial, cultural or even religious ground. It is a kind of folklore. Stereotyping Jews as greedy, selfish or deceitful may apply to individual persons of Jewish descent but such traits are found within all other communities as well. Certain traits in the Jewish community might be explained by their history of displacement, expulsion and scattering over a large territory, including Europe, Iran, Central Asia and Africa. Their “oriental” background and alien practices of eating, clothing and even celebrations made them seem exotic; leading to their identification as “the other,” and singling out over the centuries. While today, it is mostly impossible to recognise Jews in the street, still old habits die hard. This compels Jews to stick together and isolate themselves even more.

Coming back to our initial remark about the Foreign Minister being called anti-semitic, such a qualification makes no sense at all. Avner Falk wrote,

“The German word antisemitisch was first used in 1860 by the Austrian Jewish scholar Moritz Steinschneider (1816–1907) in the phrase antisemitische Vorurteile (antisemitic prejudices) to characterise the French philosopher Ernest Renan’s false ideas about how ‘Semitic races’ were inferior to ‘Aryan races.’”

It is high time to do away with such a misnomer. What are we facing then if not anti-semitism? It is anti-Zionism!

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