

GLOBAL

Does Human Rights Watch Understand the Nature of Prejudice?

A powerful advocate appears to believe that anti-Semitism is sparked in part by Jewish behavior.

By Jeffrey Goldberg



Police in Sarcelles, just outside Paris, block rioters from attacking a synagogue in July. (Benoit Tessier/Reuters)

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A few days ago, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, tweeted the following statement: “Germans rally against anti-Semitism that flared in Europe in response to Israel’s conduct in Gaza war. Merkel joins.” Roth provided a link to a *New York Times* article about the rally, which took place in Berlin.

Roth’s framing of this issue is very odd and obtuse. Anti-Semitism in Europe did not flare “in response to Israel’s conduct in Gaza,” or anywhere else. Anti-Semitic violence and invective are not responses to events in the Middle East, just as anti-Semitism does not erupt “in response” to the policies of banks owned by Jews, or in response to editorial positions taken by *The New York Times*. This is for the simple reason that Jews do not cause anti-Semitism.

It is a universal and immutable rule that the targets of prejudice are not the cause of prejudice. Just as Jews (or Jewish organizations, or the Jewish state) do not cause anti-Semitism to flare, or intensify, or even to exist, neither do black people cause racism, nor gay people homophobia, nor Muslims Islamophobia. Like all prejudices, anti-Semitism is not a rational response to observable events; it is a manifestation of irrational hatred. Its proponents justify their anti-Semitism by pointing to the (putatively offensive or repulsive) behavior of their targets, but this does not mean that major figures in the world of human-rights advocacy should accept these pathetic excuses as legitimate.

A question: If a mosque in Europe or in the U.S. were to be attacked (God forbid) by Islamophobic arsonists, would Ken Roth describe such an attack as a manifestation of “anti-Muslim hatred that flared in response to the conduct of Muslim groups in the Middle East?”

The demonstration in Berlin, at which the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, denounced anti-Semitism in un-Rothian fashion—which is to say, she denounced it without excusing it—was meant to protest the rough treatment of Jews, and Jewish institutions, across Europe, mainly at the hands of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries. These events included the sacking of synagogues; the desecration of Jewish cemeteries; arson attacks on Jewish-owned stores; and physical attacks on people who dress in an identifiably Jewish manner. The demonstration in Berlin was also meant to protest much of the discourse at anti-Israel rallies over the summer: “Death to Jews,” and “Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas,” were two of the slogans heard at rallies in Germany and elsewhere.

The people who perpetrated these violent acts, and who made these genocidal statements, were not protesting Israeli army policy. They were giving vent to sharp and negative feelings about Jews, feelings that obviously predated this summer's war (Jews were victims of hate crimes in Europe before the latest round of fighting in the Middle East; the massacre of Jewish children at a school in Toulouse, and the fatal attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels, are two examples.)

There are, of course, non-anti-Semitic ways to protest Israeli policy and decision-making, and many in Europe walked this path: Demonstrations denouncing Israeli behavior were staged outside Israeli embassies; other anti-Israel activists called for arms embargoes, and so on. Many hundreds of opinion pieces critical of Israel were

published in Europe over the summer, and I've only seen a handful that resorted to anti-Semitic tropes in order to make their case.

(There are separate questions about proportionality of coverage, and Israel-centered obsessiveness among elites, that are important to consider when discussing the reaction to any events involving Israel, and Matti Friedman addresses some of these questions in his [famous essay on the topic](#). This is not my subject for the moment, nor is a related question concerning the nature and meaning of the term “anti-Zionist.” Suffice it to say that a demonstration of “anti-Zionists” demanding “Death to Israel,” a call that was heard frequently in Europe during the summer protest months, is not philo-Semitic. But even “Death to Israel,” with its promise of violence, and its contempt for the rights of the Jewish people to have a state, does not compare to “Jews to the gas.”)

I don't know what motivated Ken Roth to blame the Jewish state for the violent acts of anti-Semites. I do hope that he reconsiders his position on the root cause of anti-Jewish prejudice.

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