

Presenter: Giovanni Matteo Quer, Jerusalem

Title: **“The Politics of Neglect: Antisemitism, the UN, and the Reticent Human Rights World”**

Panel: Jurisprudence

International law provides a huge amount of instruments to combat racism, discrimination, and hatred. UN agencies report on and condemn forms of antisemitism. The UNESCO elaborates projects for Holocaust remembrance and invests in education for tolerance, acceptance of diversity, and pluralism. The UN Secretary General, in occasion of his recent visit to Israel warned that “antisemitism is alive and well.” So, why is antisemitism growing? Is it a matter of ineffective policies or lack thereof? More provocatively, why does the world need a further organization, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), to address Holocaust denial, trivialization, and antisemitism? Shouldn’t be the UN the appropriate forum for monitoring, denouncing, and combating Jew-hatred? Finally, what is the need of mobilizing actors to combat on antisemitism, when there are solid human rights NGOs that have progressively consolidated their reputation in protecting fundamental rights? This paper addresses how the UN deals with antisemitism and its “politics of neglect.” Antisemitism is not denied, but either it is condemned as a form of Holocaust denial, or it is relegated to be a phenomenon linked to extreme right-wing, racist speech. Contemporary forms of antisemitism, connected to Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict, are acknowledged, though too rarely and never concretely. Moreover, they are “diluted” in a general discourse about hatred, bigotry and prejudices against religion, often associating them with Christianophobia and Islamophobia.

Additionally, no concrete step is taken to address these issues. The failure to face bluntly and directly new forms of antisemitism has major consequences in the capacity to address the phenomenon as a whole. The lack of vision and concrete action contributes to creating the circumstances in which antisemitism grows through anti-Israel attitudes, including double standards and use of traditional antisemitic imaginary. While UN anti-Israel bias is exposed by pro-Israeli groups and analyzed by numerous studies, this paper focuses on how antisemitic narratives reflect in anti-Israel attitudes and how human rights narratives exploited to advance the case against Israel are often imbued with antisemitic rhetoric. Examples include divestment initiatives, Judaization slanders, and accusations of targeting children.

Finally, an intriguing aspect is the societal contribution to the combat on antisemitism. While it is still unanimously considered as a form of racism, antisemitism has progressively been expunged from the human rights world. No major human rights NGO analyze antisemitic phenomena or denounce Jew-hatred. No major human rights NGO is actually active in fighting against Jew-hatred. While big human rights actors are engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict and mainly devote their work to bash Israel, antisemitism passes almost unobserved and is demoted to be part of what is considered pro-Israel lobbying. The failure to include antisemitism in larger human rights policies results in the marginalization of the phenomenon and the necessity to create other venues for opposing it. IHRA, Jewish organizations, and pro-Israel forums serve as platform to expose contemporary antisemitism and elaborate strategies to contrast it. Yet, the appropriate place for this action should be the UN and its several agencies devoted to the protection of human rights.

The Politics of Neglect

Antisemitism as a global, contemporary, and tangible phenomenon is noticeably neglected in the UN. Politics of neglect comprise: diluting antisemitism in other forms of bigotry, limiting antisemitism to Holocaust remembrance, reducing antisemitism to extreme right discourse, and failing to address antisemitism in its contemporary forms.

Since 9/11, the UN has consistently dealt with novel forms of bigotry directed against religious groups. Increasing attacks on Christian communities in Muslim countries and growing intolerance against Islamic communities in the Christian world are two major consequences of the clash of civilizations that the attack on the Twin Towers brought to surface. In this context, the UN has also pointed to growing antisemitism, as an effect of the Arab-Israeli conflict, without elaborating on it. Subsequently, antisemitism has been relegated to its traditional manifestation, in connection with the resurgence of the extreme right. This evolution is evident in the work of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance as well as the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

In the first years of 2000s, antisemitism was described as a result of “the developments in the Middle East,” but always connected to Christianophobia and Islamophobia. As a consequence, this approach failed to identify the multi-faceted ways in which Jew-hatred began manifesting itself during the Second Intifada. By the beginning of 2010s, antisemitism began to be considered a mere extreme right phenomenon. Interestingly, sporadic reporting of antisemitic incidents includes only traditional antisemitic rhetoric, cemetery vandalizing, and

neo-Nazi manifestations. No reference to antisemitic incidents in occasion of anti-Israeli demonstrations in Europe.

A considerable amount of actions has been devoted to the preservation of the memory of the Holocaust often carried out by UNESCO. In this way, antisemitism has been addressed as the major underlying force that brought to the implementation of Nazi plans. However, the institutionalization of Holocaust remembrance, the promotion of educational projects, and the elaboration of guidelines are mainly directed to European States. A study issued by the UNESCO in 2015 on Holocaust teaching in textbooks reveals that in certain States, mainly belonging to the Asian bloc, the Holocaust is exploited to advance anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli sentiment through minimization, trivialization, and veiled reference to conspiracy theories. No follow-up action and no comprehensive strategy have ever been elaborated to tackle this alarming trend.

The platform for contemporary antisemitism

Since the adoption of the 1975 resolution that equated Zionism to racism, the UN has been a platform for Israel-bashing. Attacking Israel was a strategy of the Cold War logic, where the Soviet bloc and great part of the Non-Aligned States advanced anti-Israel resolutions.

Contemporarily, a new wave of Israel-bashing has begun since the 2001 Durban Conference, which defined the anti-Israel programmatic agenda. The new logic of anti-Israel bias unfolds in the human rights discourse, such as accusations of apartheid, racism, indiscriminate violence and crimes against humanity. It is not a mere question of disproportionate commitment to the Palestinian cause or disparate criticism of Israel, but a real exploitation of the human rights discourse that leads to the germination of new antisemitic rhetoric.

The UN acknowledges, even if too infrequently, the existence of contemporary manifestations of antisemitism. The failure to demarcate and address such manifestations has major consequences on their unleashed evolution through anti-Israel policies, including double standards and the use of traditional antisemitic representations for portraying Israel. In order to exemplify how contemporary antisemitic discourse displays in UN platforms, this paper will refer to three phenomena: the Judaization slander, the obsession with children, and the advancement of divestment initiatives.

The 2016 decision of the Human Rights Council (HRC) to draft a list of companies that operate in the post-1967 territories has been contested as a direct involvement of the anti-Israel boycott movement in UN policies. More than that, it is clearly an action that holds Israel accountable according to exceptional standards that are not applied to other countries. In this respect, the question of Western Sahara helps to understand anti-Israeli sentiment. So far, the

principle of “interest of the local population” has been applied to business conducted in the territories administered by Morocco. The same loose principle is not applied to the post-1967 territories, which are dogmatically considered occupied and any Israeli presence or international involvement with Israeli actors across those territories is deemed illegal. The drafting of a list of companies and the first actions taken by the HRC in this direction are clearly signs of a biased policy that denies all claims advanced by Israel and considers its presence there as the source of all evil.

The obsessive focus on Israel’s policies after the territorial changes consequent to the 1967 Six Day War is also at the basis of the Judaization slander. Israel is accused of designing, planning, and implementing a policy of ethnic, cultural, and religious alteration of Jerusalem, whose real identity would be in danger. Several States manipulate the UN platform advancing the Judaization slander for portraying Israel as polluting entity that schemes for robbing, contaminating, and destroying – an antisemitic archetype that is now proposed against Israel. The recent UNESCO decisions on Jerusalem and Hebron, which deny their Jewish character, have been welcomed as a first international action to stop Israel’s allegedly destructive force. Finally, the several UN bodies that discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict are often used to attack Israel as the worse human rights violator. In this frame, there is a special attention on children victims of the conflict. Allegedly, Israel would abduct, ill-treat, and kill children as part of a military policy of terror and indiscriminate violence. The incredible attentiveness to children results in a portrayal of Israel as a cruel State that specifically targets minors for pursuing expansionist plans. The language and images used also reflect another antisemitic archetype, namely the blood-libel.

Redressing contemporary antisemitism: for the renewal of the human rights agenda

Ever since the Durban Conference, antisemitism not only has been expunged from the human rights agenda, but also has become the by-product of a certain ideological view over the Arab-Israeli conflict. The silence of the UN and of NGOs on anti-Jewish violence in occasion of anti-Israel protests, such as the antisemitic incidents in July 2014, the reticence to address antisemitism as a specific form of hatred and racism, as well as the active promotion of anti-Israel and anti-Zionist rhetoric contribute to fueling contemporary anti-Jewish sentiment. Not even the preservation of Holocaust remembrance, the only realm in which antisemitism is dealt with, seems to serve as a platform for shared action with human rights NGOs.

The dormant human rights system seems to have downgraded antisemitism to a solely Jewish agenda, whereas it still retains Holocaust remembrance as a partially universal mission (at least directed to the Western world). Additionally, the anti-Israeli agenda that characterizes a

certain part of this system has been transformed in a stage of untethered antisemitism. And yet, there are human rights bodies, there are human rights instruments, and there are platforms for cooperating with human rights actors. Therefore, the fight against antisemitism needs to return to the UN and the human rights world. While there is an explicit need to create parallel platforms that address contemporary antisemitism and work with States for implementing policies, action within the UN should not be discouraged. For this to happen, the human rights agenda must be reformed and actors involved in the fight against antisemitism could play a pivotal role in this ambitious and crucial enterprise.