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Notions of Jewish Power, Manipulation and Conspiracies in Contemporary Antisemitism in Sweden

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The focus of my presentation lies on notions of Jewish power and conspiracies in contemporary Swedish antisemitism. These notions, which are of course core ideas in modern antisemitism, continue to play a central role in anti-Jewish thinking and propaganda in Sweden even today. In my remarks I briefly discuss how these ideas are being articulated and in what political contexts they may be found. I also say something about the prevalence of these kinds of perceptions. I would like to emphasize, though, that since research on contemporary antisemitism in Sweden is rather limited, the picture I offer is very much preliminary and partial. However, the qualitative and quantitative studies that have been made do allow for some conclusions to be drawn. First I would like to place the issue in a broader context. Antisemitism constitutes a serious problem in Swedish society. This may be seen, for instance, in hate crime statistics¹, in the results of various polls and in the visibility of anti-Jewish tropes in Swedish public debate. But it is important to keep things in perspective. Some of the descriptions that have been circulating in foreign media and elsewhere, such as the claim made by the President of the European Jewish Congress in 2012, that Sweden today "is a center of antisemitism"², are simply unfounded. Although it is always difficult to compare the situation in one country with that in another, existing survey studies and reports on hate crimes seem to indicate that the level of antisemitism (in terms of popular attitudes and incidents) is lower in Sweden than in several other European countries. To this can be added that in no political party of any significance in Sweden is antisemitism part of its ideology or political program.

Furthermore, anti-Jewish discourse in Sweden contains a number of themes, some of which are remnants of Christian anti-Judaism, others are reproductions of modern antisemitic notions, and yet again others are in some cases linked to historical forms of anti-Jewish thinking, but shaped by and adapted to post-war circumstances, mainly the Holocaust and its consequences and the establishment of Israel and Middle East conflict. In many cases, of course, contemporary anti-Jewish discourse is an amalgamation of several of these elements.

In public debate anti-Jewish ideas and arguments emerge in various contexts, central among them being discussions that relate to Israel and the Middle East, to US domestic and foreign policy, and to the Holocaust and its place in contemporary political culture. That being said, it is also important to make clear that there is no research - no evidence whatsoever - pointing to criticism of Israel or of any of these issues in any general sense being tainted by antisemitism. Anti-Jewish stereo-

¹ In 2012, 221 antisemitic hate crimes were reported, up from 194 in 2011. See *Brottsförebyggande rådet, Hatbrott 2012, Rapport 2013:16*, Stockholm 2013.

² Cnaan Lipshiz, EJC President: Sweden a center of anti-Semitism, *Jerusalem Post*, 25 January 2012.

types and tropes figure in these discussions, but it is certainly not the dominant pattern.³

To return to the notion of a conspiratorial Jewish power, it is safe to say that this idea, the depiction of Jews as a homogeneous transnational actor who directly or indirectly controls finance, media and politics in the US and much of the Western world, including Sweden, and who uses its power to advance the goal of Jewish dominance, is an essential ideological component within the part of the Swedish extreme right that is closer to national socialism. A recent study on violent, anti-democratic propaganda on the Internet published by the Swedish Media Council, a government agency, concludes that, with regards to ideology and propaganda, Jews still constitute a prime enemy for this part of the radical right. Although strongly anti-immigrant, many of these groups explain the emergence of multicultural societies and non-Western and Muslim immigration to Europe and Sweden as part of a Jewish plan to weaken and destroy so-called "white" Western societies in order to secure Jewish control.⁴

While the parties or organizations belonging to this part of the far-right may be numerically small, their websites seem to garner a substantial number of visitors. The Media Council study estimates that the seven most frequented websites together have approximately 144,000 page views per day.⁵ How many of those who visit sympathize with the message they spread is of course difficult to say, but the risk that visitors are influenced by what they read should not be underestimated.

An ideologically founded antisemitism may also be found among radical Islamists, but there is little research on this topic with regard to Sweden. Having studied of a number of open, Swedish-language Salafist websites, the Media Council report concludes that Jewish conspiracies is a recurring theme. Jews, for instance, are accused of conspiring, both historically and today, to destroy Islam. Yet there are few such sites in Swedish, and they are believed to have much fewer visitors than websites belonging to the radical right. On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that Swedish radical Islamists visit or are active on non-Swedish websites as well as on closed on-line forums.⁶

The Islamic Association in Sweden, a member of the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, is one of the more prominent Swedish Muslim bodies, although it is highly unclear how much support it has within the Muslim community. While the leadership of the Islamic Association has not publicly or directly spread conspiracist ideas about Jews, they have praised ideologues and theologians that do, and the organization has repeatedly, over a number of years, invited

3 Henrik Bachner, *Political Cultures of Denial? Antisemitism in Sweden and Scandinavia*, in: Lars Rensmann and Julius H. Schoeps (Eds.), *Politics and Resentment. Antisemitism and Counter-Cosmopolitanism in the European Union*, Leiden & Boston 2011; Henrik Bachner, *Återkomsten. Antisemitism i Sverige efter 1945*, Stockholm 2004, pp. 555–600.

4 Statens Medieråd, *Våldsbejakande och antidemokratiska budskap på internet*, 2013, pp. 11, 55-57, 76, 240, 244-246.

5 Statens Medieråd, 2013, p. 237. The method used for measuring visits has been criticised, *Högerextrema dominerar webbhatet*, *Aftonbladet*, 18 Juni 2013.

6 Statens Medieråd, 2013, pp. 185-187, 201-204, 227, 237, 240

speakers known for openly promoting such ideas, including pointing to the forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as a master plan for Jewish domination.⁷ Propaganda of this kind has also been disseminated at seminars arranged by publicly funded organizations like the Association for Afro-Swedes and Ibn Rushd, an educational association affiliated with the Islamic Association.⁸

The myth of a global Jewish conspiracy, of secret Jewish networks controlling finance, media, culture and politics, is also central to the propaganda of Radio Islam, a multilingual website run by the Swede Ahmed Rami. Radio Islam contains, for example, an extensive list of Swedish Jews said to be part of a criminal network running the country as well as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in seven different languages.⁹ Similar forms of antisemitism is also at the forefront of the propaganda spread by Israel Shamir, another Swedish citizen. Originally from Russia, and today maybe mostly known for his collaboration with Julian Assange and Wikileaks, Shamir runs a multilingual website in which Jewish conspiracies are brought forward as an explanation for both historical and contemporary world events.¹⁰

The Jewish cabal, it should be noted, is also a recurring motif on certain so-called alternative news sites on the web, and not least within the Swedish offshoot of the conspiracist Truth movement, which rejects the official explanation of the 9-11 attacks.¹¹ On Flashback, one of the largest forums for online discussion in Sweden¹², antisemitic views are expressed in many threads, and a substantial number of them focus on Jewish power and conspiracies. For example, there are threads on how Jews were behind Bolshevism, orchestrated the Iraq war, caused the financial crisis, seek to destroy Europe through "mass immigration" and so forth.¹³ The total number of people expressing such thoughts might be limited, but again there is reason to be worried about the effect they might have on readers.

Notions of a vast and manipulative Jewish power, however, are not isolated to more extremist milieus or the fringe. Expressed in more subtle ways, they also

7 Lasse Granstrand, Antisemitisk talare bjöds in av Islamiska förbundet, Dagens Nyheter, 25 March 2011; SKMA, Mustafa-affären – eller hur legitimering av judehat blev "kamp mot antisemitism", SKMA Nyhetsbrev, June 2013.

8 SKMA, Organisationer med statliga bidrag befrämjar antisemitism, SKMA Nyhetsbrev, October 2013.

9 Radio Islam website: <http://www.radioislam.org>. Radio Islam started as a radio station in Stockholm in 1987. The website was set up in the mid-1990s. Over the years Ahmed Rami has cooperated with both right-wing extremists and Islamists. During the last 10 years he has been a recurring guest commentator on Iran's Sahar TV, and has appeared on Hizbollah's channel Al-Manar. See Henrik Bachner, Radio Islam, in: Wolfgang Benz (Hg.), Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Band 5, Berlin/Boston 2012, pp. 502-504.

10 Israel Shamir's website: <http://www.israelshamir.net>. Israel Shamir is a pen name for Adam Ermash. See Henrik Bachner, Israel Shamir, in: Wolfgang Benz (Hg.), Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Band 2/2, Berlin 2009, pp. 767-768; David Leigh and Luke Harding, Holocaust denier in charge of handling Moscow cables, The Guardian, 31 January, 2011; Jonathan Leman, I dåligt sällskap, Expo, No. 2, 2011.

11 Jonathan Leman, Sagan om de två tornen, Expo, No. 4, 2009; Jonathan Leman, „Sanningsrörelsen” utmanar demokratin, SKMA Nyhetsbrev, October 2010; Mathan Ravid, Hatet är inte isolerat till kommentarsfälten, SKMA Nyhetsbrev, December 2011.

12 On November 1, 2013 Flashback claimed to have 805,960 members; <https://www.flashback.org>. In 2010 Dagens Nyheter estimated that Flashback had between 1.6 and 2.2 million unique visitors per week, Flitiga filmare hjälper polisen, Dagens Nyheter, 15 October 2010.

13 Flashback Forum: <https://www.flashback.org> (22 October 2013).

figure in the political mainstream, mainly within certain forms of left-wing but occasionally also conservative discourse on US policies and the Middle East.

This is seldom a discourse that in a direct sense attacks Jews, but rather a form of argumentation that, through innuendo, euphemisms and code words like “Zionists” or “lobby groups”, transports images of Jewish omnipotence, cunning and conspiracies. With regard to US policies, this discourse must of course be distinguished from discussions that point to or criticize the very real influence that pro-Israel lobby groups like, for example, AIPAC have. What I am referring to here are depictions of a conspiratorial Jewish power, claims that the so-called “Israel lobby” controls the US government, that US presidents are simply marionettes for sinister forces serving alleged Jewish or Israeli interests. This is a discourse that also draws on notions of separate and homogeneous Jewish interests as well as traditional stereotypes of Jewish disloyalty and treacherousness.

A few examples to illustrate the problem: During the nominating process leading up to the US presidential election in 2008, an article in the cultural section of *Aftonbladet*, Sweden's largest daily, for example, claimed that it did not matter which of the democratic candidates won, since both were nothing but tools for “Israel-friendly financiers”.¹⁴ After Obama had won the election, a posting on a then popular left-wing blog stated that the President's chief-of-staff was a “strategically placed Jewish Zionist in the Democratic Party who, like others of his ilk, regularly puts Israel's interests before those of the US.”¹⁵ In 2011 in Swedish public service radio a professor of political science, and a conservative pundit, explained that the United States was actually not governed by the Obama administration, but was in fact run by what he called, “a permanent government”, a government that behind the scenes controlled American policies no matter who was president. This secret government had brought Obama to power and was represented in the White House by two of Obama's key advisors, both of them Jews, who served what was described as “certain interests in the Middle East”.¹⁶ The image also pops up (and not always in subtle ways) in popular culture, like in 2007 when a well-known Swedish artist rapped about “the prisoners who sit in their cages in Cuba, just because the US is run by some Jews”.¹⁷ Worth noting is that claims of this sort are seldom met with criticism, which points to another and maybe even more troubling aspect of Swedish public discourse, namely, that these kinds of notions, although not necessarily shared, are not generally perceived as problematic and even less so as antisemitic.¹⁸

Another theme that sometimes surfaces in mainstream discourse is that of Jewish or Zionist manipulation and control of Swedish or Western media. A sometimes-heard charge is that an alleged “Israel lobby” is censoring Swedish media when it comes to reporting on the Middle East. The all-powerful “Israel lobby”

¹⁴ Åsa Linderborg, *Ingen vinner*, *Aftonbladet*, 3 January 2008.

¹⁵ Lasse Wilhelmson on the blog *Jinge.se*, 6 November 2008 (14 February 2009).

¹⁶ Interview with Claes G. Ryn in *Studio ett*, Swedish Radio, 9 September 2011.

¹⁷ Ken Ring, *Håll om dom*, *Hiphoptexter*, www.hiphoptexter.com (5 November 2013).

¹⁸ Regarding reactions to antisemitism in Sweden, see Bachner, *Political Cultures of Denial?*, in: Rensmann and Schoeps (Eds.), *Politics and Resentment*, 2011; and Bachner, *Återkomsten*, 2004, pp. 555–600.

trope also emerges in discussions on contemporary antisemitism. There are, of course, examples where the question of antisemitism is misused in the debate on Israel, but in this particular discourse antisemitism as a problem is routinely described as more or less an invention by an influential but often anonymous "lobby" with the aim of silencing criticism against Israel.¹⁹ A typical example of how this trope is being used is the comment made by Ilmar Reepalu, the then mayor of Malmö, who in 2010 was criticized for rationalising antisemitism as criticism of Israel and for holding Malmö's Jews partly responsible for the hostility they encountered. Dismissing the critique, Reepalu explained that it was orchestrated by "the Israeli Lobby".²⁰

One last theme I would like to mention is the portrayal of Islamophobia as a Jewish- or Zionist-led conspiracy. This theme, which can be found in Islamist and certain far-right contexts, has become more visible as well in mainstream discourse. The debate that followed the terrorist attack in Norway in 2011 illustrates the phenomenon.²¹ Whereas there were some who tried hard to construe the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik as a "Zionist" and to associate his alleged "pro-Israel" stance with his deed, the Swedish researcher Ola Tunander, professor at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO), went further. In an article in a Norwegian scholarly publication in 2011 he asked whether Israel might actually be behind Breivik's murderous attack. He didn't claim that this was the case, but speculated that Israel could have sought to punish Norway and the Norwegian Labour party for its policies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Tunander also found an indication of a possible Israeli link in the fact that the attack took place on the same date, 22 July, as the Irgun bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946.²² Tunander's conspiratorial speculations were later echoed by the internationally known Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung.²³

In 2012 the Malmö mayor Ilmar Reepalu, a leading Social Democrat, claimed that the Sweden Democrats, a right-wing populist, anti-immigration and anti-Muslim party, had strong links to the Jewish congregation in Malmö.²⁴ After being criticised the mayor retracted the statement, but later the same year, in an editorial in the magazine of the Religious Social Democrats in Sweden, another

¹⁹ These themes are discussed in Bachner, *Political Cultures of Denial?*, in: Rensmann and Schoeps (Eds.), *Politics and Resentment*, 2011; and Bachner, *Återkomsten*, 2004, pp. 555–600.

²⁰ Reepalu made this statement in the Danish TV2 show *Lorry; Israelisk lobby bakom kritik*, Skånskan.se, 2 March 2010.

²¹ Willy Silberstein and Henrik Bachner, *Terroråden i Norge används för att sprida antisemitism*, Newsmill.se, 6 September 2011, republished in SKMA Nyhetsbrev, December 2011; skma.se/nyhetsbrev/

²² At the end of his article Tunander concluded: "In short, the signs that we can interpret points in different directions, but historically this type of terrorist attack has often been linked to one or another state agency, and we cannot exclude that this is the case also this time." Ola Tunander, *Inspiratorer, intressenter, innvielsesmestre og investorer i Breiviks verden*, *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, No. 4, 2011, pp. 347–358.

²³ Responding to criticism, Galtung added that "six Jewish Companies own 96 % of world media". His source for this claim was an American neo-Nazi website. He also suggested that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* might not be a forgery after all, adding: "It is impossible [to read it] today without thinking of Goldman Sachs." Johan Galtung, *Om klare linjer og tvisyn*, *Humanist*, No. 1, 2012, <http://humanist.no>; Ofer Aderet, *Pioneer of global peace studies hints at link between Norway massacre and Mossad*, *Haaretz*, 30 April 2012.

²⁴ Paulina Neuding, *Vi klarar inte invandringen* (interview with Ilmar Reepalu), *Neo*, No. 2, 2012.

Social Democratic politician in Malmö described contemporary Islamophobia as the creation of a “Jewish-European right-wing extremist conspiracy”.²⁵

Finally, a few words on the question of prevalence of this form of antisemitic notions within the Swedish population. Unfortunately, few surveys have been carried out that can elucidate this question, and none of them recently, so little can be said about the development over time. According to a poll conducted by the Swedish Integration Board in 2004, 7% agreed with the statement that Jews “have too much influence in Sweden.”²⁶ However, when these notions are adapted onto the global scene the results have been somewhat different. According to the results of a survey of antisemitic attitudes within the adult population, which I conducted together with Jonas Ring for the Living History Forum and the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention in 2005, 15% agreed completely or partly with the statement that Jews have “too much influence in the world today”; 26% agreed completely or partly with the statement that Jews “have major influence on the global economy”; 18% agreed completely or partly with the statement “The Jews have major influence on the media”; and 17% agreed completely or partly with the statement “The Jews control US foreign policy”. Some 7% believed that there is some truth to the statement that “Israel was involved in the 9-11 terror attacks on the US”.²⁷

According to a survey of attitudes among upper secondary school students, conducted by the Living History Forum in 2009, 18% of this group agreed completely or partly with the statement that Jews have “too much influence in the world today”, up from 16% in 2003.²⁸

To conclude: Notions of Jewish power, manipulation and conspiracies continue to play a key role in antisemitic thinking and propaganda in Sweden. They appear in extreme and explicit forms, and form a crucial part of ideology and propaganda within parts of the far right and the radical Islamist milieu. But they also figure in more subtle and coded forms within mainstream political discourse. As shown by survey studies, these notions, specifically when applied to the global scene, also seem to have support from a not insignificant minority of the Swedish population.

²⁵ Editorial by Adrian Kaba, *Tro & Politik*, 2 July 2012.

²⁶ Integrationsverket, *Rasism och främlingsfientlighet i Sverige. Rapporter och delstudier om rasism och främlingsfientlighet i Sverige 2004*. Integrationsverkets rapportserie 2005:02, 2005, p. 63.

²⁷ Whereas the results indicated that educational levels played a significant role in the tendency to embrace other forms of antisemitism, the level of education, interestingly enough, seemed to have little effect on the tendency to embrace notions of Jewish power and influence. Henrik Bachner and Jonas Ring, *Antisemitiska attityder och föreställningar i Sverige*, Forum för levande historia and Brå, 2006. According to the results from a multinational survey conducted by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in 2005, 27% of the Swedish respondents fully or partially agreed with the statement that “Now, as in the past, Jews exert too much influence on world events”. AJC, *Thinking about the Holocaust 60 Years Later. A Multinational Public-Opinion Survey*, 2005.

²⁸ Forum för levande historia, *Den mångtydiga intoleransen*, Rapportserie 1: 2010.

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