



# DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT JEWS



europaan  
netwerk  
tegen  
racisme

## Who are European Jews?

There is no easy answer to what defines someone's identity as Jewish, as there are cultural, ethnic, religious, political, family and personal implications. Jewish may refer to both a people and a religion. Considerations on who is a Jew depend on self-identification and other societal aspects. According to the Jewish law, a person born from a Jewish mother or any person who has gone through the process of conversion to Judaism is Jewish.

Jews have been present in Europe as early as 90 BC. There are no reliable and comparable data on the number of Jews in Europe but **the current Jewish population of Europe is estimated at around 2 million** (0.3% of the European population), while the pre-World War II Jewish population in Europe was estimated at 9 million (about 7.7% of the then European population).<sup>1</sup> Jewish communities are very heterogeneous. There are variations in religious

## What is antisemitism?

First used by Wilhem Marr in 1870, antisemitism refers to hatred towards Jewish people, people perceived as Jewish, Jewish institutions, Jewish communities, Jewish culture, Jewish properties and in some cases the State of Israel as a Jewish collectivity. The definition which is most used by institutions such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, originating from the work of the former European Union Monitoring Center (EUMC), is: **"Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities".**

streams – among others Orthodox, Reformist, Conservative Masorti and Reconstructionist Jews<sup>2</sup> – but also in culture and practice, which can be divided into two main backgrounds Ashkenazim, originally concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe, and Sephardim, originally from the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>3</sup> Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews) are Jewish communities originally from North and North-West Ethiopia. Many non-religious Jews may also self-identify as Jews and/or as part of the majority society.

## Myth 1: "Jews are wealthy, stingy and greedy"

In the Jewish tradition, giving money to the poor is called *tzedakah*<sup>4</sup> and considered an act of justice, which is required in Judaism.<sup>5</sup> The picture of the Jew being good with money and stingy is directly linked to the assumption that all Jews are successful and rich. But neither in Europe<sup>6</sup> nor in the United States<sup>7</sup> are Jewish people richer than the average population. This stereotype still leads to violence and murder of Jews.<sup>8</sup>

The stereotype that greediness is an essential characteristic of Jews emerged in medieval times. Christian law considered usury a sin but Jews were forbidden to own land or to work in the craft sector by discriminatory laws. They therefore became merchants, money-lenders and tax-collectors, which made them easy scapegoats in difficult economic or political times.<sup>9</sup>

2 <http://www.joi.org/qa/denom.shtml>

3 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_ethnic\\_divisions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_ethnic_divisions)

4 <http://www.jewfaq.org/tzedakah.htm>

5 <http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/CAS-Myths-and-Facts.pdf>, p.18

6 <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2014/1/17/dont-forget-jewish-poverty-in-europe#.VRpcBvmUcaA>

7 [http://www.metcouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=jewish\\_poverty\\_study](http://www.metcouncil.org/site/PageServer?pagename=jewish_poverty_study)

8 In 2006 a young Jewish cellphone salesman was tortured to death in France and the perpetrators known as "The Barbarians" told the police that they wanted to blackmail a high ransom as he was Jewish and therefore must be rich.

9 <http://www.thejewishweek.com/arts/film/jews-money-and-mythology>

1 For an interactive map of Jewish populations in Europe, visit the Institute for Jewish policy Research: <http://www.jpr.org.uk/map>

## Myth 2: “Jews are bloodthirsty, steal children and killed Jesus”

These very old stories of Jews stealing preferably Christian children to use their **blood in the matzos for Passover**<sup>10</sup> continue to this day, for example when Israeli politicians are depicted eating children or stealing organs from Palestinians. Another popular theme in cartoons and headlines is the crucifixion by Jews, which leads back to the accusation that Jews, instead of Romans, were responsible for the murder of Jesus. This myth is particularly incoherent not only because the Torah prohibits the consumption of blood<sup>11</sup> (strict slaughter regulations to ensure animals do not contain any blood) but also because obviously Jews are not cannibals.

These myths emerged when Jews were stigmatised as enemies of Christianity and discriminated against by special laws. Often portrayed as children of Satan, with horns and tails, this demonisation and isolation prepared the ground for stories such as the “**blood libel**”, which dates back to the Middle Ages. To explain the death of a Christian boy in Norwich, England in 1144, the monk Thomas of Monmouth accused the local Jews of murdering him to sacrifice him and drink his blood at Passover.<sup>12</sup> Based on this myth, Jews were repeatedly blamed for murders and often tortured to confess.<sup>13</sup>

The idea that “Jews killed Jesus” originated in a Gospel of Matthew (27:25) in the New Testament, which mentions Jewish religious leaders delivering Jesus to the Roman authorities to execute him.

In fact, as most scholars agree,<sup>14</sup> he was executed by the Roman rulers of Israel, who killed tens of thousands of other Jews by crucifixion, including two others on the day Jesus was executed.<sup>15</sup>

## Myth 3: “Jews secretly dominate the media, banks and the politics”

Jews are not disproportionately represented in these spheres of influence. Even if some individuals with a Jewish name or background may be high-profile in an industry or sector, it does not make the whole sector “controlled by Jews”. Jewish politicians are not overly represented in Europe. Since the beginning of the 20th century, there has been only one Jewish head of State in Europe (Léon Blum in France, from 1946-1947) and 13 heads of government.<sup>16</sup> Only few media have Jewish CEOs, or CEOs with a Jewish background. For instance, TF1, which is the biggest European TV channel in terms of employees and audience, is not headed by a Jewish executive. The impression that Jews are more present in the finance or media sector than other ethnic or religious groups is often generated by highlighting the Jewish background or name of a successful person.

Connected to this stereotype are **conspiracy theories** according to which Jewish lobbies secretly pull the strings of western politics. Jewish groups such as AIPAC and J-street can be effective in influencing a number of decision-making processes, in similar ways as other advocacy groups such as tobacco or disability rights groups. This is the result of professionalism, high quality work and strategising, not of specific group affinities. Other

10 <http://avirtualpassover.com/libels.htm>. Matzos is unleavened bread traditionally eaten by Jewish people during the week-long Passover holiday.

11 <http://www.magentzedek.org/educational-materials/what-is-kashrut/>

12 <http://www.historyinanehour.com/2010/11/25/blood-libel-and-the-murder-of-william-of-norwich/>

13 <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3408-blood-accusation>

14 <http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/CAS-Myths-and-Facts.pdf>, p.24

15 [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Jews\\_and\\_Non-Jews/Attitudes\\_Toward\\_Non-Jews/Christianity/who-killed-jesus.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Issues/Jews_and_Non-Jews/Attitudes_Toward_Non-Jews/Christianity/who-killed-jesus.shtml)

16 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Jews\\_in\\_politics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Jews_in_politics)

minority rights organisations are also increasingly impactful in their advocacy activities.

The accusation that Jews have been trying to take over the world is particularly nonsensical in light of Jewish history and persecutions of Jews especially in Europe. This myth is clearly linked to myth 1, as it is assumed that Jews have money and therefore can buy politicians, media, etc. The “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” claim to prove a secret pact of Jews to rule the world.<sup>17</sup> Based on a satire about Napoleon III and not about Jews in the first place, this document was circulated in the 19th century and modified until it became the report of a supposed secret midnight meeting of Jewish leaders allegedly trying to organise the takeover of the world.<sup>18</sup> These dialogues were proven to be fake and only served to spread antisemitic fantasies.<sup>19</sup> These publications were used to justify, among

other antisemitic reasons and factors, **pogroms against Jews**<sup>20</sup> in different countries and as well the Holocaust. Until today the Protocols continue to circulate in antisemitic movements and keep framing an impressive number of contemporary conspiracy theories.

## Myth 4: “There is no antisemitism in Europe anymore”

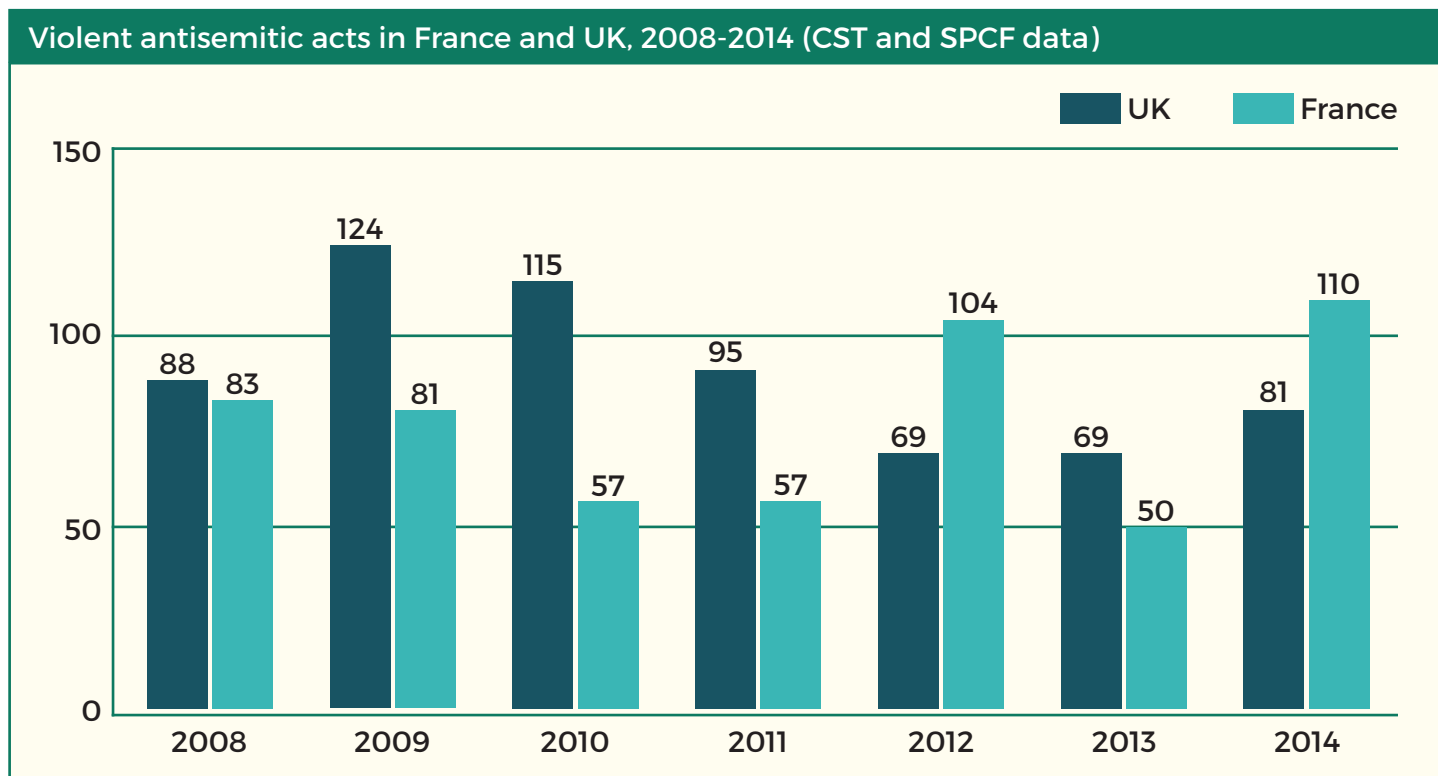
Sadly antisemitism is not a phenomenon of the past in Europe, but rather on the rise again. Racist slogans invoking “death to the Jews” have been heard during protests against the 2014 war with Gaza in several European cities. Online antisemitic hate speech, especially on social media, is also sharply rising across Europe. Since 2012, in three years, 13 Jews have been killed only because they were Jews. These incidents, strongly condemned

17 <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/protocols.html>

18 <http://www.holocaust-history.org/short-essays/protocols.shtml>

19 <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/33d/projects/protzion/DelaCruzProtocolsMain.htm>

20 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Jewish\\_pogroms\\_in\\_the\\_Russian\\_Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Jewish_pogroms_in_the_Russian_Empire)



Source: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, *Could it happen here? What existing data tell us about contemporary antisemitism in the UK, May 2015* ([http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2015.Policy\\_Debate\\_-\\_Contemporary\\_Antisemitism.pdf](http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2015.Policy_Debate_-_Contemporary_Antisemitism.pdf))

by a great diversity and majority of community leaders, reflect worrying spikes in antisemitic incidents and come as a stark reminder that **antisemitism is still very much a reality in Europe** today.<sup>21</sup>

In 2014 antisemitic violent attacks in France doubled compared to the year before and 51% of all racially motivated attacks targeted Jews. An EU survey shows that Jews in Europe feel that antisemitism has increased in the country they live in over the past five years (76%) and that they are increasingly afraid of being verbally harassed (46%) or physically attacked (33%). In the past 12 months, over half of all survey respondents (57 %) heard or saw someone claiming that the Holocaust was a myth or has been exaggerated.<sup>22</sup>

**Far-right parties and neo-Nazi movements** have a strong antisemitic basis of support, in Hungary, Greece, but also in western Europe, as the July neo-Nazi protest against “the Jewification” of London shows. Muslims, themselves a discriminated community, are not immune to antisemitism. Some Muslims are influenced by theological discourses rooted in antisemitism, far-right ideologues, negationists and those spreading confusion between Israel and Jews in general. Many recent attacks by violent extremists committed in the name of Islam in western Europe have targeted Jews. However, affirmations that Muslims are the only or overwhelming source of antisemitism in Europe are based on an attempt to pit Jews and Muslims against each other, divide society and spread both Islamophobia and antisemitism. Antisemitism is complex in the sense that throughout history, “it has come from all parts of the political spectrum and from different religious groups living in close proximity to Jews”.<sup>23</sup>

## Myth 5: “All Jews are Zionists. Zionism is bad”

Today, Zionism means different things to different people and as such the word can often be misused or misunderstood. It is useful to understand the roots of the movement before invoking the word pejoratively against the Jewish people or to make assumptions about any Jewish person’s feelings and opinions about Israeli policies.

Zionism is a Jewish national-political movement founded in 1896 by Austrian Journalist Theodor Herzl aiming to re-establish a Jewish homeland in the Holy Land. The word refers to “Zion”, the hill upon which the Temple of Jerusalem was built (now it is the Western Wall which remains). The yearning to return to Zion, the biblical term for both the Land of Israel and Jerusalem, has been the cornerstone of Jewish religious life since the Jewish exile from the land two thousand years ago, and is embedded in Jewish prayer, ritual, literature and culture. With the persecution of Jews in Europe in the late 19th Century, including pogroms<sup>24</sup> and widespread discrimination, there was a feeling that only a Jewish state could guarantee the security of the Jewish people. Jewish immigration from Europe had been increasing steadily in the early 20th century, particularly after the support expressed by the British government in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 for the establishment of a “national home” for the Jewish people. After the genocide of 6 million European Jews in the Holocaust during WWII, the British Mandate of Palestine was divided into two parts, one of which became the independent state of Israel in 1948. Support or sympathy for the idea of Zionism, or for the presence of Jews in Israel does not mean that Jews cannot be critical towards the policies of Israeli governments.

21 <http://www.enar-eu.org/Escalation-of-anti-Semitism-in>

22 [http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2013-discrimination-hate-crime-against-jews-eu-member-states-0\\_en.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2013-discrimination-hate-crime-against-jews-eu-member-states-0_en.pdf)

23 [http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2015.Policy\\_Debate\\_-\\_Contemporary\\_Antisemitism.pdf](http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2015.Policy_Debate_-_Contemporary_Antisemitism.pdf)

24 A pogrom is a violent riot aimed at massacre or persecution of an ethnic or religious group, particularly one aimed at Jews.

## Myth 6: “All Jews support the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza”

There is a strong bond between Jews and Israel, which goes back to biblical origins of the “Promised land”. However, this does not mean that all Jews support the politics and policies of the Israeli government concerning the Palestinians. In the United States, 44% of Jews think the settlement building policy hurts Israel’s own security interest, only 38% think that the current Israeli government is making a sincere effort in the peace process and 89% say that being Jewish is compatible with being strongly critical of Israel.<sup>25</sup> In the United Kingdom, research from 2010 found that the majority of British Jews are in favour of a two-State solution.<sup>26</sup> There are vibrant debates amongst Jews in and outside of Israel on the situation.

## Myth 7: “One cannot even criticise Israel anymore without being called an antisemite”

There are many people who criticise the Israeli government’s policies and politics without being called an antisemite. Almost everyone seems to have an opinion on Israel’s politics – even if not interested in politics in general. However, many have used so-called criticism of Israel or anti-Zionism to consciously or unconsciously hide antisemitism. When Israel is only portrayed as a threat

or aggressor and gets deprived of its right to existence, the motivation behind such discourses might be antisemitic. This is particularly relevant as these attitudes have an impact on the safety of European Jews, as spikes in antisemitic incidents in the United Kingdom and France occur when conflict arises in Israel.

Some tools<sup>27</sup> have been developed to help **differentiate what is a legitimate criticism of Israel from antisemitism**. For instance, comparing the Israeli government to the Nazi regime trivialises the horrors of the Holocaust, generalises different political decisions by the Israeli government and projects negative stereotypes against Jews onto the country. Holding all Jews responsible for Israeli policies is clearly antisemitic, as it simply generalises and reduces Jewish individuals to an essential group that would be accountable for Israel’s policies. These racist views tend to justify violence towards Jews as revenge or a way to pressure Israel. Caricatures that display Jews and/or Israel drinking children’s blood or eating children use the blood libel described in myth 2. Other caricatures may build on other myths about Jews instead of choosing to depict criticism of Israeli policies. Some perceive that efforts to refute the existence of Israel – or to deny the right of Jews to live in Israel - are a fundamental attack on the possibility for Jews to have a safe place and are a lack of consideration for the reasons – past and present – that would justify this presence. Such attacks may be antisemitic in some instances.

25 A Portrait of Jewish Americans Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-full-report-for-web.pdf>

26 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/15/israel-land-peace-british-jews>

27 Such as the 3-D test, developed by Natan Sharansky in 2004.

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The European Network Against Racism (ENAR) stands against racism and discrimination and advocates equality, solidarity and well-being for all in Europe. We connect local and national anti-racism NGOs throughout Europe and act as an interface between our member organisations and the European institutions. We voice the concerns of ethnic and religious minorities in European and national policy debates.

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