The ADL and Berlusconi: honoring a "flawed" friend of Zionism

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On Tuesday, September 23, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the organization founded in the United States 90 years ago with the stated aim of fighting anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry, bestowed its Distinguished Statesman Award on a leading European political figure. The recipient of the award, at a gala fund-raising dinner held at New York City's luxurious Plaza Hotel, was none other than Silvio Berlusconi, the prime minister of Italy who made headlines and sparked wide outrage recently when he came to the defense of the former fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

In an interview with the British *Spectator* magazine, the Italian prime minister was asked to compare the Italian fascist ruler and Saddam Hussein. He told the *Spectator* that Mussolini's "was a much more benign dictatorship. Mussolini did not murder anyone. Mussolini sent people on holiday to internal exile."

Tullia Zevi, a former leader of Italy's Union of Jewish Communities, expressed the outrage of many when she told the *New York Times* in a telephone interview, "He said fascism was a very mild dictatorship! It was so 'mild' there were many political murders from the very beginning, and also for the Jews."

On the eve of the ADL award dinner, the *New York Times* published a letter signed by three Nobel laureates—economists Franco Modigliani, Paul Samuelson and Robert Solow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—calling the ADL award "shocking to anyone who knows Mr. Berlusconi's controversial history."

The fascist regime in Italy passed anti-Semitic race laws in 1938 depriving Jews of all civil rights and leading to their expulsion from schools and discrimination in all sectors of public and private life. The laws set the stage for the deportation later of thousands of Jews to their deaths in the Nazi concentration camps. Mussolini publicly announced his agreement with Hitler's "final solution," explicitly declaring his support for the murder of Jewish women and children and the "cleansing" of all Jews from Europe.

The ADL award was decided on a year ago, but Berlusconi's pro-fascist pronouncements were nothing new. They are only the most recent expression of a sympathy that he has repeatedly voiced for the Mussolini regime and its policies of anti-communism, extreme chauvinism and dictatorial rule. In 1994, shortly after becoming prime minister, Berlusconi told the *Washington Post* that "Mussolini did some good things here."

Berlusconi rules in a coalition with Mussolini's political descendants, the "post-fascist" National Alliance. He recently attacked a German political critic by likening him to a Nazi commandant. He has consistently denounced his critics at home in terms that are virtually identical to those utilized by the German Nazis and their Italian fascist partners. According to Berlusconi, the judges and prosecutors who have pursued corruption investigations against him are "mentally disturbed," and communists in disguise.

In the face of Berlusconi's long political record, however, as well as the request from a number of Jewish groups that the ADL rescind its award, ADL director Abraham Foxman dismissed the criticism as "politically laced" and said the organization would proceed with its Plaza Hotel gala as planned. Foxman, who is quoted in the media on an almost daily basis as a major spokesman for American Zionism, said of Berlusconi, "He's a solid friend, but he's a flawed friend." According to Foxman, Berlusconi's latest comments were "inappropriate" and "uninformed," but "that's not enough for me to say he's no longer a friend."

At the dinner itself, the ADL head said the organization was "delighted" over the presence of the Italian prime minister. The black-tie audience gave Berlusconi two standing ovations. Chairing the dinner were Barnes & Noble chairman Leonard Riggio and *Daily News*

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publisher Mortimer Zuckerman. Also present was the right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who praised Berlusconi, recalling that a decade ago he had said he was "entering politics to save Italy from the communists." Also present was former secretary of state Henry Kissinger.

Berlusconi's nostalgia for fascism is not a secret. The ADL's embrace of this man, however, may surprise some who have heard Foxman's pronouncements as a self-proclaimed opponent of white supremacists and racists of all varieties. The reason the ADL stood fast against denunciations of the award was made clear by Foxman himself. "He has spoken out that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism," he told *The Jewish Week*, describing the Italian rightist as a "good friend of Israel."

The logic of the ADL is clear. Just as "anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism," so support for Israel erases any taint of ant-Semitism, even for self-proclaimed sympathizers of fascist dictatorships that were bent upon the extermination of the Jews.

The *Times* reported, "Other Jewish leaders suggested that a deep sense of worry about Israel, during a time of increased violence there, makes it easier to overlook flaws in the search for friends." Jason Isaacson of the American Jewish Committee, another "mainstream" Zionist organization, declared that "World leaders who are seen as sympathetic to Israel are much prized. That solidarity earns rewards from the Jewish community." According to this twisted logic, the governments of France and Germany, because they have criticized the attack on Iraq, are guilty of harboring or encouraging anti-Semitism. Berlusconi, however, because he embraces Israel, is a friend of the Jewish people despite his fondness for Mussolini.

For generations, the struggle against anti-Semitism has been inseparably linked to the battle against all forms of anti-democratic oppression and particularly against fascism. The anti-Semitism of the 20th century was bound up with anti-communism as Hitler and Mussolini alike branded Marxism and socialism as "Jewish." Opposing anti-Semitism meant upholding universal democratic rights against all forms of racial and religious discrimination and persecution.

Pro-Israeli Jewish organizations like the ADL have lurched sharply to the right over a number of years, embracing the most reactionary political allies from the Republican Party to the Christian fundamentalist right and now Berlusconi. In the process, they have abandoned their identification with democratic principles.

In large part, this is due to their insistence on uncritical support for Israel, a state based on religious and racial exclusivity and oppression, the very same ideology and practices that Jews in America and elsewhere have historically fought in order to defeat anti-Semitism.

The increasingly brutal methods taken by the Israeli government under Sharon—"collective punishment," political assassinations, and most recently the public threat to murder the Palestinian Authority's elected president Yasser Arafat—have inevitably earned it brutal friends, most notably Bush and Berlusconi. On the other hand, groups like the ADL brand anyone who criticizes the brutalization of the Palestinian people as an "anti-Semite."

There is, of course, another element in this turn to the right, and that is the enrichment of a social layer that previously identified with the struggles of immigrants and the oppressed. No doubt among the black-tie crowd led by Murdoch, Zuckerman and Kissinger there were those who are prepared to agree with Berlusconi that Mussolini was not so bad and believe the fascist myth that the Duce was forced by the exigencies of his alliance with Hitler to go along with anti-Semitic "excesses." Having embraced Bush and Sharon, they are likely prepared to accept the need for a strongman to defend their wealth and privilege.

These abominable apologies for Berlusconi and his ilk simply underscore the truth that the Zionist state is no more the representative of the interests of the Jewish people than the Bush Administration and the ruling elite it speaks for stand for the interests of the American people. That these forces, which have defended their role by dishonestly pointing to the awful fate of European Jewry at the hands of Nazism, are now being politically unmasked is to be welcomed.

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