

# Israel rolls out the welcome mat for Europe's neo-fascists

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The two-day visit of Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini to Israel this week is only the latest episode in the increasingly open alliance between the Zionist state and resurgent forces of the far-right and neo-fascism in Europe and beyond.

Salvini, the leader of the anti-immigrant Lega party, has become the dominant figure in Italy's right-wing coalition government, setting an agenda based on the slogan of "Italians first" and vowing to "cleanse" Italy of undocumented migrants "by force if necessary."

He has in both deed and word resurrected the politics of Italian fascism, which was responsible for the systematic suppression of Italian Jews, who were stripped of their rights under racial laws enacted by the dictator Benito Mussolini and deported to concentration camps, where nearly 10,000 died, most of them at Auschwitz.

Salvini has deliberately invoked the legacy of Mussolini, citing Il Duce's sayings and stressing the supposedly positive achievements of Italian fascism. His political rallies are regularly attended by fascist militants carrying portraits of the dictator and other symbols of his regime.

Last July, on the occasion of Mussolini's birthday, Salvini tweeted: "tanti nemici, tanto onore," meaning "so many enemies, so much honor," a slight variation of Mussolini's famous slogan "molti nemici, molto onore," or "many enemies, much honor."

The xenophobic and anti-Muslim policies he has implemented hauntingly parallel the persecution of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s. His anti-immigrant crackdown has seen Italy turn away boatloads of refugees, including children and pregnant women, just as ships bearing Jews fleeing Nazi persecution were turned away eight decades ago. He has also called for the state to register all of Italy's Roma people, along with the "cleansing" of all "non-Italian" Roma from the country and the demolition of their "illegal houses." Jewish groups in Italy protested the proposal, pointing to its chilling similarity to the racial laws enacted against the Jews under Mussolini.

This is the man welcomed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a "great friend of Israel" and taken Wednesday to Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust memorial, for the traditional photo-op.

Within both Israel and among Italy's Jewish population there was opposition and anger over the visit. During an evening tour of Jerusalem, Salvini was booed in the streets, with protesters shouting, "Fascist, we don't want you here."

Italian Jewish organizations addressed a letter to Salvini, demanding that he use the visit to condemn "anti-Semitic acts, oblivion and trivialization of the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s [committed] by movements and parties belonging to the ethno-nationalistic far right in Italy and Europe." Of course, he did no such thing.

Among broad layers of Jews, both within Israel and internationally, the fact that Israel, whose founding was defended with the claim that it would provide a refuge from fascism and anti-Semitism, is now welcoming and allying itself with fascists and anti-Semites is a source of extreme disquiet and revulsion.

Salvini is only the latest in a long line of such "great friends" to pay their visit to Yad Vashem, which some Israeli critics of the Netanyahu government have described as a "washing machine," where far-right figures go to clean themselves up, absolving themselves of their anti-Semitism through their support for Israel.

In the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, Anshel Pfeffer wrote: "It is clear what they come for on the political level. Politicians who are historically tainted with their party's past associations with fascist and neo-Nazi roots can get Israel's kashrut [kosher] stamp by visiting the Western Wall and the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial."

Among these pilgrims has been Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has described Admiral Miklos Horthy, Hungary's World War II-era dictator, who collaborated with the Nazis in the murder of some 565,000 Jews, as "an exceptional statesman." Like Salvini, he has engaged in a relentless demonization of the US-based, Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros, with openly anti-Semitic overtones, portraying his funding of immigrant aid groups as part of a plot to rob European nations of their Christian and racial heritage.

Another "friend" to visit the Yad Vashem "washing machine" was Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who rules as part of a coalition with the Freedom Party, a far-right group founded by two former Nazi SS officers. After a guide pointed

out to him that some of the same Austrian towns memorialized at the site for the slaughter of their Jewish populations had recently seen anti-Semitic acts by members of the Freedom Party, the Austrian government filed a formal complaint with the Netanyahu government, which compelled the museum to issue an apology.

Nor are such relations restricted to Europe. Also making the trek to Yad Vashem was the autocratic ruler of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte, who publicly praised Hitler and vowed to emulate him by exterminating three million “criminals.” His pilgrimage to Israel was driven in large measure by the desire to procure arms to conduct this slaughter.

And Netanyahu has announced his plans to attend the inauguration of the fascist former army captain Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil. Bolsonaro, who has praised the country’s former dictatorship and extolled the virtues of torture, had said during the election campaign that he would ape Donald Trump by moving the Brazilian embassy to Jerusalem.

Netanyahu has cast his embrace of the far right as a brilliant exercise in realpolitik, stating during a trip to Budapest last year that he could leverage these regimes against “Old Europe,” which has continued to make its formal criticisms of Israel for its illegal occupation and settlements policy and maintain the pretense of upholding some rights for the Palestinians.

Such a reactionary strategy would be bad enough. But the alliance between the Israeli state and the far-right is not merely a pragmatic foreign policy exercise. There is a natural ideological and political affinity that stems both from Israel’s present day political and social policies as well as the historical roots of Zionism.

For their part, the far right and the neo-fascists admire the Zionist state for its racist policies and its determination to build an ethno-centrist society by means of Apartheid-style oppression of the Palestinian people. The passage last July of the so-called “Nation-State Law” enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state is something that they would like to emulate with their own xenophobic and racist laws.

The same social and economic contradictions that are giving rise to the growth of neo-fascism in Europe and elsewhere are producing similar results in Israel itself. A garrison state involved in continuous acts of militarism in the Middle East, Israel is also wracked by social tensions, registering the highest poverty rate of any of the so-called developed countries and the most extreme social inequality, with the exception of the United States. These conditions have generated mounting working class protests and strikes, including a recent nationwide walkout by social workers over poor pay and deteriorating working conditions.

Zionism itself is one variant of extreme nationalism. Before World War II and the Holocaust, it was a relatively isolated movement, which arose as a peculiar expression of the nationalism that prevailed in eastern Europe in the 19th

century—one based not on universal democratic principles, but rather on exclusivist conceptions of racial, religious and linguistic hegemony. These same ideological conceptions were to underpin the rise of fascism.

A column published Thursday in the Israeli daily *Haaretz* drew attention to the seemingly paradoxical affinity between Zionism and fascism, noting that the Zionist movement’s principal founder, Theodor Herzl, “believed that people with anti-Semitic views would help realize his dream because of their desire to get the Jews out of their own countries.”

As the Zionist state has embraced anti-Semites and neo-fascists in Europe and elsewhere, it has pursued an aggressive worldwide campaign to brand as an anti-Semite who must be silenced anyone on the left daring to criticize the daily crimes committed by the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. Presumably such a proscription should apply to anyone opposing the far-right and neo-fascist “friends of Israel.”

Just days before Salvini’s visit, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article by Daniel Schwammthal of the American Jewish Committee declaring that “Far leftists—including Jeremy Corbyn, leader of Britain’s Labour Party—pick up traditional anti-Semitic tropes, replace ‘Jews’ with ‘Zionists,’ and deny anti-Semitism.” Such slanders are part of the hysterical campaign raging throughout Europe, and in particular in Britain, to discredit left-wing political views with false accusations of anti-Semitism. Salvini’s visit exposes the filthy and absurd character of these charges and shows that the Israeli state, not its left-wing critics, is guilty of boosting neo-fascism and anti-Semitism.

The alliance between the Israeli government and far-right and fascist forces on a global scale is the clearest barometer of the bankruptcy and reactionary dead-end of the entire Zionist project.

The way forward for the masses of Jewish and Arab workers in Israel and throughout the region lies in a united struggle to overthrow the Zionist state and the various bourgeois Arab regimes in the region and replace them with a United Socialist States of the Middle East. This perspective requires the building of a new revolutionary leadership through the construction of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel and across the Middle East.



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