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Suddenly, this year anti-Semitism has become a prime topic in Europe. Two months ago, the newly-founded Transnational Institute was the forum of a lively debate on anti-Semitism in Brussels; a week later the EU Commission held a seminar on the same subject. And now we have this high-level conference - nothing like it has been arranged before.

Seminars and conferences serve politicians, officials, intellectuals - a wider public is reached by movies, Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" is seen by millions. I believe every Jew - every Jew of my age - has at some point in his life been challenged by the Gibson story.

I remember how at the age of seven I one day came home from school with a bloody nose, having had a fight with a boy who claimed that my father had killed Christ. And what did you answer - my parents asked. I answered: My father is not that old.

Today, anti-Semitism in Europe - or within the European Union - has less to do with religion. The position of Jews in today's European society is of course fundamentally different from what it was before and during World War II. Anti-Semitism persists, but its character has changed.

One example of the change in attitudes toward Jews has not often been mentioned. I refer to the role of Jews in military service. In my youth Jews were held in contempt because it was believed that they were no good as soldiers. According to a bitter joke, this was the only opinion shared by Truman and Stalin. Both were astonished to learn that the Jews were able to defend their new-born state in 1948. But today it's reversed, the Jewish soldiers of the Israeli army are accused of being too tough, too brutal, in dealing with the Palestinians.

To criticise Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policy is of course not anti-Semitism. The Prime Minister faces opposition in his own country, and in Europe and America many prominent Jews condemn his strategy. Yet some of the criticism reflects an anti-Zionism, calling into question Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. In the late 1960's and 1970's the European radical left regarded anti-Zionism as part of anti colonialism. Israel was labelled an outpost of imperial America. Anti-Zionism merged with anti-Americanism. Some of these views still exist.

The anti-Israel view that prevails in most European Countries, combined with a softer attitude toward the Palestinians, does have an indirect effect on European Jewry in two ways.

Among Europeans considered well informed on international affairs, Jews are believed to be pulling strings behind the scenes in Washington. When the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir declared that "the Jews rule this world by proxy", Europeans of course rejected his claim: the Jews do not rule the world. But do they rule the United States?

No doubt the intellectual power of American Jewry is considerable, reminding us Europeans of the migration to the United States of European intellectuals fleeing Nazi and Fascist tyranny and causing a transatlantic shift in the granting of Nobel-prizes. Although there is not a single Jew in the present American cabinet, some Jewish politicians and writers can be said to have influence on the American policy. But there are other Jews who strongly oppose it, as any reader of the New York Times or the

New York Review of Books can testify. To imagine that US policy is guided by a secret Jewish cabal is simply a myth - one as old as the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" forged over a century ago by the tsarist secret police.

Europeans remember the Protocols as a bizarre relic from the distant past, but in the Islamic world its Arabic version is today a best seller. A report on the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas recently issued by the International Crises Group is revealing:

"The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is approvingly cited (in the Hamas charter) as a basis on which Hamas holds the Zionism movement and the Jews in general responsible for every real or perceived ill to have afflicted the modern world, including capitalism and communism, both world wars, the UN Security Council and the drug trade ---" etc.

Hamas, which is supported by one fifth of the Palestinian people, is officially committed to the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic state throughout Palestine. How to persuade Hamas to join the peace process is discussed by ICG in a 34-page report. My point is that this is not just a local matter. The anti-Jewish world view described in the Hamas Charter is widely shared throughout the Islamic world. It is used to justify terrorist attacks against Israel, as well as Western targets.

Thus a virulent type of anti-Semitism is brought to Western Europe by Muslim immigrants. Of course only a small number of immigrants are guilty of violent acts against Jews, but understandably governments fear that violence will increase as long as the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians continues to remain unsolved.

Thus, the combination of several factors creates the gap between Western Europe and the United States with regard to Israel: Western Europe facing a large Muslim immigration is anxious to settle the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The US looks upon Israel as an ally in its war on terrorism and accepts the Sharon view that the Palestinian side is at present incapable of negotiating a peace agreement. The Jews of Europe feel squeezed between the two powers.

This is the background to President Jacques Chirac's recent significant public gesture. By inviting the President of Israel to a state visit - the first Israeli head of state to receive such an invitation in 17 years - he created great relief among the 600 000 members of the Jewish Community in France - the largest in Europe and third largest in the world. It was an important step toward collective European action against the new type of anti-Semitism threatening the Jewish communities.