

Amsterdam Riots and the Wolf Who Cried Antisemitism

written by Alex de Jong | November 17, 2024



Amsterdam's liberal mayor Femke Halsema declared that the clashes which followed the Maccabi Tel Aviv and AFC Ajax match at the end of last week were the result of 'a toxic cocktail of antisemitism, hooliganism and anger over the war in Palestine and Israel'. Whilst the description is not wholly false, it is certainly misleading. This was made clear by the municipal council's own executive report in which Halsema wrote the above statement.

Now, the Dutch right is using a distorted interpretation of the violence in the city, and weaponizing antisemitism, to further its racist agenda and to justify a crackdown on Palestine solidarity.

Already, prior to the game on Thursday evening, it was clear that Maccabi supporters had come to Amsterdam looking for a fight. They trooped through the city singing racist and genocidal chants and harassing people they assumed to be Muslim or Arab. Furthermore, given Amsterdam is generally a left-leaning city with a substantial Muslim community, it is not uncommon to see Palestinian flags hanging from balconies or in windows. Videos circulated showing Maccabi fans went around tearing them down.

Things further escalated when Tel Aviv team's fans assaulted a taxi-driver, provoking a response from a closely knit and quickly mobilized group.

Tensions had run so high before the match, that the Amsterdam municipal council executive even considered banning it. However, they decided against this out of fear that the hundreds of Maccabi fans in the city would become even more uncontrollable. Instead, the executive tried to reach out to football clubs to ask their supporters to calm down. The Israeli ambassador was also asked to make a statement that football and politics should not mix, but whether he responded to this has not been made public.

Double standards

This entire situation was the result of blatant hypocrisy on the part of Dutch authorities when it comes to the suffering of Palestinians. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian teams were banned, yet when similar requests were made by Palestine solidarity organizations to ban Israeli teams, they were ignored. The Amsterdam executive even claimed that Maccabi fans, who in Greece had hospitalized a man for wearing a Palestine scarf, were not known to be dangerous.

When the match in Amsterdam finally started, Maccabi fans loudly disrupted the minute silence for the victims of the flooding in Spain. This is perhaps no surprise as the Spanish government is one of the more outspoken European states when it comes to being critical of Israel's war.

After the match, houses with Palestinian flags were again beleaguered by groups of Maccabi fans.

Things escalated that night as groups of local youth got into fights with the Maccabi fans, seeking them out across the city. 62 people were arrested, ten of them were Israeli. After a day in which the police mostly took a hands-off approach to the Maccabi supporters, arrests disproportionately targeted local youth instead. The Jewish anti-Zionist group Erev Rav released a statement criticising the police force for targeting local young people of Moroccan background while 'Maccabi fans who initiated provocations faced no consequences'.

Erev Rav had initially planned to commemorate the 1938 pogrom in Germany last weekend, but cancelled their event. They explained that they had little trust in the Amsterdam police keeping anti-Zionist Jews safe from the Maccabi supporters.

The group also denounced the instrumentalizing of Jewish identity by Maccabi supporters.

Political opportunism

The Dutch far-right unsurprisingly saw an opportunity in all of this. After the match, Geert Wilders, leader of the largest party in the Dutch parliament, declared that what had happened was a 'pogrom of the worse kind' and called for Halsema to be sacked. He claimed that she had supposedly failed to protect Jews against antisemitic violence. It is undeniable that some people involved in the clashes threw around antisemitic insults and it was said that people who 'looked Jewish' were ordered to show their passports, all of which must absolutely be condemned, but to call this a pogrom is totally disproportionate.

In reality, the right is instrumentalizing the issue of antisemitism by equating all Jews with the state of Israel - the same tactic often used by the Israeli government that cynically deploys it against its critics. Wilders knows well that antisemitic statements are unfortunately not unknown in Dutch football, but he seems to pick and choose when to speak out against it. For example, a particularly infamous chant that is often hurled at Amsterdam team Ajax, calls for the gassing of all Jews. But because this form of antisemitism comes from mostly white football supporters, there has been far less interest from the Dutch right which puts its energy towards linking antisemitism to Islam and migrants.

Wilders is also not the only culprit. Upon returning from visiting far-right Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, Dutch PM Dick Schoof declared that antisemitism results from 'a failure to integrate' into Dutch society. For him, the problem is migrants, not the racist and fascist far-right rhetoric being peddled across Europe.

Where are left-wing politicians?

In the aftermath of the match the situation grew more tense. On Monday people clashed again with the police. This came after the executive had banned all demonstrations and a protest on Sunday had been dispersed. Between Sunday and Wednesday, scores of protesters were detained during heavy handed dispersals of demonstrations by the police. Activists had called a rally in defense of democratic rights and in solidarity with Palestine.

Despite all of this repression, the parliamentary left has been mostly absent. Though this comes as no surprise. There have been significant Palestine solidarity efforts in the Netherlands from

demonstrations to sit ins, yet left-wing parties – with the exception of the small radical party BIJ1 – have hardly been involved. Worse still, large parts of the Dutch Labour Party have also historically been strongly pro-Israel.

The silence of the parliamentary left is making it easier for the right to whip up a climate of hatred against migrants, to link antisemitism with Islam, and to label Palestine solidarity as hostility to Jews.

Green party Mayor Halsema has only added fuel to the fire in her insistence on comparing the events over the recent days with pogroms. Her imposition of the ban on protests in Amsterdam is also clearly an attempt to avoid further criticism from the right, but this has only legitimized an authoritarian crack down on Palestine solidarity in particular.

The longer term consequences of the recent events remain to be seen, but the general trajectory is clear. Aided by the silence and opportunism of the center-left, the far-right has been the main beneficiary.

A moral panic has taken hold in the country, and once again, Muslim youth, especially those of Moroccan descent, have been declared an existential threat to Dutch society. This time, it's over their supposed innate antisemitism. As Right-wing parties float the idea of stripping them of Dutch nationality (at least for those who hold a dual nationality), as a punitive measure, the hooliganism by Maccabi supporters and their glorification of Israel's genocide has fallen to the wayside.

In the coming weeks and months attempts to criminalize Palestine solidarity will likely to grow, and supporting Palestine liberation will be increasingly synonymous with antisemitism. Already just last month, a spokesperson from the Palestine solidarity organization Samidoun was banned from the country and the Dutch cabinet has asked for the organization to be entirely banned.

The only way to resist the right's authoritarian policies and racism, is for the left and solidarity activists to stick together, tell the whole story of what happened in Amsterdam and defend the rights to organize and speak out in solidarity with Palestine.

First published by New Arab.