

On the use of the terms “(anti-)Semitic” and “(anti-) Zionist” in modern Middle Eastern discourse

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Abstract

Just as political and cultural discourse in general, modern Middle Eastern discourse is at times characterized by a great deal of hostility, not only between different states or religious denominations, but also state-internally among various ethnic, political, or religious groups. This short article focuses on the use of the attributes “Semitic” and “Zionist,” as well as their negative counterparts “anti-Semitic” and “anti-Zionist,” respectively, in examples of both Arabic and Israeli critical to hostile discourse. The focus of the discussion will lie on how the original meanings of these terms, especially in their negated forms, tend to be distorted in engaged political and cultural discourse.

Keywords: Semitic, Anti-Semitic, Zionist, *lā-sāmī*, *ṣahyūnī*, *ʿaṅṭi-šemi*, *šiyyōn*

The term “Semitic”

Brief overview of the term “Semitic”

As is well known, the term “Semitic” derives from the name of one of the sons of Noah, Shem,² and was suggested for the language family in question by the encyclopedic German historian and polymath August Ludwig von Schlözer in 1781.³ In linguistics context, the term “Semitic” is generally speaking non-controversial. Together with Ancient Egyptian, as well as the language families Berber, Cushitic, Chadic, and possibly Omotic, the Semitic language family is part of the larger Afroasiatic macrofamily (formerly also referred to as “Hamito-Semitic”).⁴ This usage of the term “Semitic” must be kept apart from the usage of the term in the compound adjective “anti-Semitic,” a term only coined in 1879 in a pamphlet by the journalist Wilhelm Marr (if not already in 1860 by the bibliographer and Orientalist Moritz Steinschneider), referring to prejudices against or hatred of Jews. The historian Bernard Lewis, in a book

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² Gen. 5:32, 6:10, 10:21.

³ Cf. e.g. Baasten 2003. The precise source is the “Repertorium” (Leipzig 1781), vol. viii, p. 161, edited by Schlözer’s pupil Karl Friedrich Eichhorn.

⁴ As Paul Newman (1984: 164) convincingly states, “[the term] ‘Hamito-Semitic’ must be firmly rejected because it keeps alive the term ‘Hamitic,’ with all of its linguistically inaccurate and culturally racist connotations.” Cf. also Hayward 2000: 84.

dating from 1986, devotes some reflection to the ethnic, religious, and linguistic aspects of the term “Semitic” but in the very title of the book, *Semites and anti-Semites*, somewhat misuses the ambiguity in the term “Semitic” for his own political purposes. As an ethnic term, “Semitic” should best be avoided these days, in spite of ongoing genetic research (which also is supported by the Israeli scholarly community itself) that tries to scientifically underpin such a concept.⁵

Use of the term in modern Arabic context

The term سامي *sāmī* ‘Semitic’ as referring to a language family (لغات سامية *luḡāt sāmīya* ‘Semitic languages’) is non-controversial among educated Arabs. One also finds some degree of identification with the term as referring to cultural and/or ethnical adherence, even though the association of linguistic, ethnic, and cultural features, as proposed in the second half of the 19th century by Ernest Renan and others, tends to be frowned upon these days, for good reasons. Stefan Wild (1985) discussed the political complications that arose due to this semantic ambiguity in connection with attempts to translate Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* into Arabic, the main issue being that Arabs who also identified with the concept *sāmī* should not be alienated by negative associations with the term that were earmarked for Jews in this irrational and polemical pamphlet. The negative calque form لاسامي *lā-sāmī* ‘anti-Semitic’ likewise is accepted in educated Arabic.

Use of the term in modern Israeli context

The linguistic use of the term שמי *šemi* ‘Semitic’ in the label שפות שמיות *śafot šemiyot* ‘Semitic languages’⁶ is equally non-controversial in Israeli context. The definition (or accepted use) of the term in an ethnic and cultural sense is a more complicated matter, as intimated above, especially against the canvas of the term יהודי *yehudi* ‘Jewish’⁷ and the term ישראלי *yisre’eli* ‘Israeli,’⁸ and not necessarily all Jews and Israelis can relate to or do identify with the term.⁹

The form of the negative term is אנטישמי *’anti-šemi*, in its traditional sense

⁵ Cf. e.g. Hammer et al. 2000.

⁶ The transcription of modern Hebrew terms is oriented at the style sheet for the upcoming *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*.

⁷ 2 K 16:6, 25:25; Jer. 32:12, 34:9, etc.; Neh. 1:2, 3:33, etc.; 1 Chr. 4:18.

⁸ Lev. 24:10; 2 Sam 17:25.

⁹ Cf. the useful *Wikipedia* entry “Semitic,” The standard modern Hebrew reference dictionary *Milon ‘Even-Šošān* (s.v. שמי) actually defines שמי *šemi* ‘Semitic’ in both ways:

מבני שם, מגזע שם בן נח: היהודים והערבים הם שמיים, עברית, ארמית, ערבית הן לשונות שמיות. מלים ממקור שמי.
mi-bne šem, mi-geza šem ben noaḥ: ha-yehudim, ve-ha-‘aravim hem šemiyim, ‘ivrit, ‘aramit, ‘aravit hen lešonot šemiyot. milim mi-maqor šemi. ‘From the sons of Shem, from the pedigree of Shem ben Noah: the Jews and the Arabs are Semites, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic are Semitic languages. Words of Semitic origin.’

of prejudice against if not outright hate of the Jewish people. There is broad consensus that true anti-Semitism is a despicable phenomenon. In modern polemical discourse, though, this term can also be (mis-)used for stigmatizing critical voices *within* the Jewish community. While there has been a long tradition – ever since the publication of Theodor Lessing’s book *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* in 1930 – to label progressive political attitudes as held by self-critical Jewish voices as *שנאה עצמית יהודית* *śin’a ‘aşmit yehudit* ‘Jewish self-hatred’, the hostile reference to such attitudes as *אנטישמיות יהודית* *’anṭi-šemyut yehudit* ‘Jewish anti-Semitism’ or even *אוטואנטישמיות* *’oṭo-’anṭi-šemyut* ‘auto-anti-Semitism’ appears to be a more recent phenomenon. All of these hostile terms yield frequent “hits” on the internet and also are reflected in recent Hebrew Wikipedia entries.¹⁰

The polemical use of the term “anti-Semitic” is, of course, not restricted to Hebrew itself, but also occurs frequently in “Western” languages like English.¹¹ To give an example taken from a polemical website run by Jewish extremists, which denounces scholars (e.g., Noam Chomsky), artists (e.g., Daniel Barenboim), journalists (e.g., Akiva Eldar), and even politicians (e.g., Shimon Peres), who are perceived as disloyal to the Jewish cause:¹²

Daniel Barenboim is the pro-terror anti-Semitic orchestra conductor who likes to wave his little baton for Palestinian audiences. He has a long history of bad-mouthing Israel. But conducting on behalf of terror is not his own pastime. He also co-authored a pro-terror anti-Israel ‘book’ with Edward Said, the professor of terror at the Columbia University Madrassah.

This polemical internet outlet even regularly refers to critical Jewish voices as “capo” or “Judenrat”, i.e. Jews pressed to collaborate in concentration camps under the Nazi regime.

On January 25th 2013, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz featured a report about the Jewish American comedian Jon Stewart (Jonathan Stuart Leibowitz), in which the latter debunked the position of conservative American and Israeli politicians to the effect that any critique of Netanyahu(’s policies) amounted to an “anti-Israeli” attitude, his main point being that about 50% of Israelis themselves

¹⁰ For the latter term, cf. “אוטואנטישמיות” (*’oṭo-’anṭi-šemyut*) in *Wikipedia*,

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Mearsheimer and Walt 2007: 188: “Anyone who criticizes Israeli actions or says that pro-Israel groups have significant influence over U.S. Middle East policy stands a good chance of getting labeled an ‘anti-Semite’. In fact, anyone who says that there is an Israel lobby runs the risk of being charged with anti-Semitism, even though AIPAC and the Conference of the Presidents are hardly bashful about describing their influence and the Israeli media themselves refer to America’s ‘Jewish lobby’ [a term that Mearsheimer and Walt deliberately do not use themselves, LE]. In fact, the lobby both boasts of its own power and frequently attacks those who call attention to it.”

¹² Cf. the Kahanist “Jewish S.H.I.T. List” (“S.H.I.T.” being an acronym of “Self-Hating [and/or] Israel-Threatening [Jew]): <http://www.masada2000.org/list-B.html>

had not voted for Netanyahu and his ideological associates.¹³

The term “Zionist”

Brief overview of the term

As mentioned in the second book of Samuel, chapter 5, verses 6ff., the term *ṣiyyōn* first referred to the Jebusite castle on the Southern part of the Eastern hill of Jerusalem, then in a *pars pro toto* sense to the hill as a whole and ultimately to the city as a whole.

The terms “Zionist” and “Zionism” were coined in 1890 by Nathan Birnbaum. The latter term can be defined essentially as “the national movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel” (so, for instance, the *Jewish Virtual Library*¹⁴). As regards the further development of the term, two main lines of thought emerged: the “political Zionism” associated with Theodor Herzl, and the “cultural Zionism” associated with Ḥad ha-‘Am (Asher Ginsberg). What is important for the following is that both of these thinkers advocated peaceful coexistence with the Arabs, contrary to popular belief also in some Western left-wing circles. Thus, the terms “Zionism” and “Zionist” should not be construed as implying *eo ipso* a hostile attitude towards Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular.¹⁵

Kutscher cites different semantic shades of the term “Zionism,” among them also the idea of “idle smooth talk about Zionist ideals not backed up by deeds.”¹⁶

Use of the term in modern Arabic context

In Arabic context, the term صهيوني *ṣahyūnī* (or *ṣihyawnī*) ‘Zionist’ is often used as a de facto synonym of the terms يهودي *yahūdī* ‘Jewish’ and/or إسرائيلي *isrā’īlī* ‘Israeli’ in contexts such as العدو الصهيوني *al-‘adūw aṣ-ṣahyūnī* ‘the Zionist enemy’ or الاحتلال الصهيوني *al-iḥtilāl aṣ-ṣahyūnī* ‘the Zionist occupation.’ It tends to be used in a negative way, and often occurs in conjunction with the attribute عنصري *‘unṣurī* ‘racist.’ Even in semi-official context, Israel has been labeled الكيان الصهيوني العنصري *al-kiyān aṣ-ṣahyūnī al-‘unṣurī* ‘the racist Zionist entity’ and the like.¹⁷ The first two syllables of the adjective *ṣahyūnī* are sometimes

¹³ “‘Circumdecision 5773’ Jon Stewart mocks Israeli election outcome.” Haaretz January 25th 2013.

¹⁴ “Zionism,” *Jewish Virtual Library*.

¹⁵ The Arabic dictionary and encyclopedia *al-Munjid* (s.v.) soberly and non-polemically defines *ṣahyūnīya* as حركة المطالبين بوطن قومي لليهود في فلسطين *ḥarakat al-muṭālibīn bi-waṭan qawmī li-l-yahūd fī filasṭīn* ‘the movement of those who strive for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.’

¹⁶ Kutscher 1982: 238. Cf. also Edzard 2006: 135f.

¹⁷ For references, cf. e.g. Edzard 1996: 42ff. and Edzard 1998: 65.

molded into a quasi-prefix صهيو šahyū- ‘Zio-,’ as in terms like صهيوأمريكية muḥaṭṭaṭāt šahyū- ‘amrīkīya ‘Zio-American schemes.’ I could not find the negative form لاصهيوני lā-šahyūnī ‘anti-Zionist’ on the internet or elsewhere, but one would assume positive connotations for the term.

Use of the term in modern Israeli context

Not surprisingly, the term ציוני ṣiyoni ‘Zionist’ is used with overwhelmingly positive connotations by modern Israelis (with the exception of a radical fringe within the ultra-orthodox Jewish community, the members of which disapprove of the concept for religious reasons). The term can have two meanings, either designating a person who supports the principles of Zionism or a person historically associated with the Zionist movement.¹⁸ Thus the negative use of the term, אנטי־ציוני ‘anṭi-ṣiyoni ‘anti-Zionist,’ can be expected to carry overwhelmingly negative connotations.

In a Haaretz article dating from January 11th 2013, the Israeli journalist Yossi Verter cites the famous Israeli author Amos Oz as follows regarding the contemporary (end of 2012/beginning of 2013) Likud-Beiteinu politics, but also criticizing the current Labor leadership:¹⁹

ממשלת נתניהו היא הממשלה האנטי-ציונית ביותר שהיתה לישראל מיום הקמתה

memšelet Netanyahu hi(’) ha-memšala ha-’anṭi-ṣiyonit be-yoter še-hayta le-Yiśra’el mi-yom haqamat-ah

the Netanyahu government is the most anti-Zionist government Israel has ever had since its foundation.

What Oz obviously had in mind is that “Zionism” in ‘Aḥad ha-‘Am’s or Theodor Herzl’s understanding entails the readiness to peaceful coexistence with the Jewish state’s Arab neighbors. Thus, his criticism refers to the circumstance that a

¹⁸ Cf. Milon ‘Even-Šošan (s.v. ציוני):

1. אדם התומך במטרות הציונות שעקריה: בסוסה של המדינה היהודית בארץ ישראל, שאיפה לכנוס רוב פזורי הגולה בתוכה, סיוע למדינת ישראל לשמש מרכז מדיני ורוחני לכל יהודי הגולה שעדין לא עלו לארץ. 2. שקשור לציונות או למי שמאמין בה.

1. ‘adam ha-tomex be-maṭarot ha-ṣiyonut še-‘iqare-ha: bisus-ah šel ha-medina ha-yehudit be-‘ereš Yiśra’el, še’ifa le-kinus rov pezure ha-gola be-tox-ah, siyu ‘li-mdinat Yiśra’el le-šameš merkaz medini ve-ruḥani le-xol yehude ha-gola še-‘adayin lo(’) ‘alu. 2. še-qašur la-ṣiyonut ‘o le-mi še-ma’amin b-ah. ‘1. A person who supports the goals of Zionism, whose principles are: the establishment of the Jewish state in ‘Ereš Yiśra’el (Palestine), the desire to gather most of the dispersed in the diaspora in it, and help to the State of Israel to serve as a political and spiritual center to all those Jews who have not yet immigrated (“come up”). 2. [A person] who is [historically] connected to Zionism or to someone who believes in it.’

¹⁹ Verter 2013.

continued occupation, let alone annexation, of Arab territories is much more likely to endanger the desired Jewish identity of the state of Israel due to the “demographic problem” than a just and peaceful territorial solution to the conflict would do. Politicians like Benjamin Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman, and political analysts as Moshe Arens would, of course, strongly disagree with Amos Oz’s statement (supposed they would bother to comment on it in the first place) and argue to the effect that it is rather their own political attitude that represents genuine “Zionism.”

Conclusion

Both the positive (non-negated) and the negated forms of the adjectives “Semitic” and “Zionist” are polysemic in modern Arabic and Hebrew, as well as in European languages. To a certain degree, there seems to be a renaissance of the term “Semitic” in an ethnic and even genetic sense in modern Israeli scholarship. In “Western” context, though, it is preferable to restrict the use of the non-negated form “Semitic” to linguistic (as opposed to ethnic or cultural) context. In the case of the term “Zionist”, one is well advised to avoid any polemical use, which does not conform to the original peaceful intentions of the intellectual founders of Zionism.

Dedication

Kerstin Eksell is a scholar who has always paid careful attention to linguistic and philological detail. These short notes are cordially dedicated to her on the occasion of her upcoming retirement in 2013.

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