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A survey to deny a problem

By ROBIN STOLLER AND ALEJANDRO BAER
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The results of a recent government-funded anti-Semitism poll in Spain proved to be an effort to address the phenomenon in the country by simply pretending it doesn't exist.

On the eve of Rosh Hashana, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos presented results of the first sociological study on anti-Semitism in Spain. "Public opinion in Spain is not anti-Semitic," he declared.

This was stunning because it stretches the imagination to arrive at this conclusion. Unfortunately, the full survey data was not disclosed at the September 9 press conference in Madrid. More disturbing, the study's general approach, methods and conclusions exhibit a somber image of the way in which anti-Semitism has been treated in Spain. Instead of diagnosing this scourge, the government-sponsored study proved to be an effort to address anti-Semitism in Spain by simply denying its existence.

PEW Global Studies and the ADL, in contrast, have repeatedly drawn attention to anti-Semitism in Spain, showing highly negative opinions of Jews.

THE SPANISH government, meanwhile, has taken some positive steps. It created Casa Sefarad-Israel as a public institution to increase knowledge of Jewish culture and foster closer ties between Spain and Israel as well as other Jewish communities, and programs to train educators on the Holocaust.

Casa Sefarad-Israel, which commissioned the study, reported that "unfavorable opinions of Jews have decreased," "unfavorable opinions about Jews match those affecting other communities," "the positive opinion about Jews has risen to 48%" and "the degree of Islamophobia exceeds by far that of anti-Semitism."

How was data obtained? The first phase of the study was qualitative and involved six focus groups. Its goal was to explore the specificity of anti-Jewish motifs, tropes and discourses in Spain to develop a more detailed questionnaire to measure their depth.

However, the results of the qualitative phase, which confirmed the existence of a large variety of anti-Semitic stereotypes, were ignored. Worse, they were not disclosed.

Casa Sefarad-Israel shifted gears halfway through the study and, disregarding the qualitative part, produced a questionnaire that not only does not measure anti-Semitic bias, but contained questions drafted in a way that would elicit positive answers. For example, respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement, "The only solution to the Middle East conflict is peaceful coexistence between Israel and an independent Palestinian state," or if they believe that Jews "create problems in Spain."

Jews in Spain, by the way, account for only 0.1% of the population.

Only two questions could be indicators of anti-Semitism, and they yielded even more worrisome data, though Moratinos did not mention these findings.

Fifty-eight percent of Spaniards believe “Jews are very powerful because they control the economy and the media.”

Among university students that figure is 62.2%. The statement “Jews use the memory of the Holocaust to their benefit” is viewed positively by 54.9%. Only one-third of Spaniards disagree with these two unequivocally anti-Semitic statements.

THIS IMPORTANT data did not appear in the executive summary sent to media, and was not mentioned at the press conference. The results Moratinos presented refute and at the same time “normalize” anti-Semitism in Spain. Opinions and attitudes about Jews are placed at the same level as those relating to other “religious communities” – Protestants, Orthodox, Catholics, Muslims, most of them widely represented in Spain. Muslims stand out as the most rejected group.

So how does the study account for the considerable percentage of the population, 34%, that has a negative or very negative opinion of Jews? It’s due to the “association of the Jewish community with the State of Israel and its policies,” states the study.

Nothing is said about the reasons why the perception of such policies is particularly negative in Spain, and whether local cultural or religious elements are included therein.

Not surprisingly, El Mundo reported shortly after the study’s release that “one-third of Spaniards are anti-Semitic because of Israeli policy.”

In sum, the study has not helped to make a diagnosis of anti-Semitism in Spain to design the interventions required in the media, educational and political settings.

What it has done is hide one issue under another (rejection of Muslims), minimize the problem and “normalize” it using a poor justification – the problem stems from Israel and “its policies.”

The institutional denial of anti-Semitism in Spain exists and everyone – not only the Jewish community – should be concerned.

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