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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the fifty-first issue of Perspectives.

That Person Was I

An Israeli-Swedish scholar fought back against pro-Palestinian defamers. It did the job

Yair Elsner

Far away from the cold winter winds of Malmö, in my small flat in Tel Aviv's Florentin neighborhood, just a few days into 2026, I received an email from the Swedish Media Ethics Council. It notified me that, following my complaint against the left-wing newspaper *Dagens ETC*, the Media Ombudsman had referred my case to the Council and recommends that the media outlet be found in breach of good journalistic practice.

What was this all about?

After spending four years in my native Sweden, including the entire period of the October 7 war, I was interviewed about antisemitism in Malmö by *Ekot*, the flagship news programme of Swedish public radio.

I told them about my experiences in a city where Palestinian flags and symbols are everywhere; about the weekly demonstrations with calls to globalize the Intifada, the assaults that I myself had experienced, and my decision to move back to Israel.

The radio coverage resulted in what cannot be described, in my opinion, as anything other than an outcry of outrage in left-wing media and across social media.

While some criticism honed in on methodological issues, questioning the statistics behind the reported Jewish exodus from Sweden, a substantial part of the reaction focused on the mere platforming of a person who, so it was claimed, should not be given the legitimacy of being interviewed by public service Swedish radio.

That person was I.

Dagens ETC, a leading newspaper in the Swedish far left, went furthest. In a news article published on August 25, 2025, it reported on the criticism leveled at *Ekot* for not disclosing my activist background. Specifically, it quoted a leading pro-Palestine Instagram account, “Vardagsrasismen,” that questioned the assault I had reported on: “It is at least as likely that the attacks were the result of his harassment of Palestine supporters and the gross racism that he himself spreads on social media.”

The astounding headline of an op-ed on August 28 was, “When *Ekot* Featured a Racist Agitator.” Not just “racist.” A “racist agitator.”

This was done without contacting me or giving me any opportunity to respond to the accusations.

On that basis, I filed a complaint with the Media Ethics Council.

What was it, then, that I had done to deserve such defamatory epithets?

Giving background for the criticism against me, *Dagens ETC* pointed to several statements I had made on X and on my podcast “Judefrågan,” among them in an interview with then Swedish ambassador to Israel, Erik Ullenhag, where I stated: “It is the Palestinian people, not Hamas, but the Palestinian people and the Palestinian national movement, who are the perpetrators in this conflict.”

This, to be sure, is a statement that I fully stand behind.

In my complaint to the Media Council, I explained why I believe this was not racism, something which the Ombudsman recorded in his response, to which *Dagens ETC* also was informed: “Elsner argued that his statements were not racial or ethnic claims, but a political and theoretical argument about collective agency. He distinguished between individual Palestinians and what he described as the Palestinian people as a collective political subject, understood at an aggregate level rather than as a set of individuals.”

I must say, I said it well.

For the concept of a national political movement to make sense at all, it must be understood as political thought and action emerging from a national collective, carried by members of that collective. Not by everyone, not uniformly, but by

sufficiently many, and to a sufficient degree, for it to appear as a collective political project.

Criticizing the Palestinian national movement, therefore, amounts to criticizing the political culture and collective political agency of the Palestinians, or in short, the Palestinians as a political subject. There is no racism here, but a standard form of political critique.

What about the claim leveled at me that was platformed by *Dagens ETC* about the supposed “harassment” of Palestine supporters?

This was not specified in the Instagram post by *Vardagsrasismen* that *Dagens ETC* had referred to, but being attuned to pro-Palestinian activist discourse in Sweden, I believe they had in mind an incident that occurred at Lund University during the spring of 2025, when I was studying there.

What happened was that, when entering the Humanities faculty, just next to the café, I encountered a so-called “Liberated Zone,” clearly delineated and separated by Palestinian symbols and posters with anti-Israel messaging.

As I was quite active in pro-Israel advocacy on X, I pulled out my phone and started to document what was going on.

As the students responsible for the manifestation engaged me, a conversation ensued, and when they rather quickly discovered that I was not likely to be convinced by their arguments, a young woman asked me to go away from there, so that “the zone actually will be liberated.”

My father experienced and fled from the Nazi persecution in Germany. In Germany of the 1930s, my father lived through a reality with signs indicating where Jews were not wanted and guards were in place to enforce the exclusion.

At a Swedish university in 2025, there are again zones that are separated to create exclusion, and though not mentioning “Jews,” and although the present-day “guards” are not Nazi stormtroopers but young female students, the bottom line was that I was asked to leave so that their zone would indeed remain “liberated.”

Finding this particularly unsettling, I started filming, confronting the pro-Palestinians with this very parallel. This, I believe, was the “harassment” referred to. And this, together with the supposed “racist” analysis of the Gaza conflict, was presented by *Dagens ETC* to be a possible explanation for the assault I was subject to and which I discussed in my radio interview.

What was the assault then?

On my way to the bus station outside my apartment in Malmö, I was approached by a man of Arab origin. I know his origin if for no other reason than because at some point he addressed me in Arabic. He had spotted the rather large Star of David that

I was wearing and apparently found this provocative. And so, he started screaming “Jew” and “Damn Jew” and various other less than friendly things at me, telling me to go away.

This I did, proceeding to the bus station, but at some point, he started moving in my direction.

From a distance, and as discreetly as I could, I took a picture of him.

This, however, was spotted by another man standing at the bus station, who alerted my assailant, who then, with his one hand conspicuously hidden underneath his jacket, aggressively approached me and, accompanied by continuing antisemitic slurs, demanded to see my telephone. What did he have underneath the jacket? I could not know, of course.

Fortunately, the incident ended without further escalation. I, of course, reported this to the police, but equally of course, nothing came out of it.

This was the incident that *Dagens ETC* reported could equally be due to my “racist” social media posts or my “harassment” of innocent Palestine-supporters who were just having a nice Liberated Zone next to the café at the Humanities faculty in Lund.

Somehow, though, it was my Star of David that my assailant was gawking at and gesturing to.

Similar incidents that happened over the period of the war in Malmö exclusively happened when I was openly displaying my Jewish identity. I will also admit that I’m not really that famous as to be recognized on the street as a Zionist activist. At least not before the left-wing media onslaught that happened.

Now, it might be quite some time before I discover my status on the streets of Malmö. That’s because I’m now safely in Israel.

What did the Media Council Ombudsman decide then?

His conclusion was: “Persons who are interviewed in the media, and their political background, must in many cases be open to scrutiny. This applies in particular where the person themselves engages in opinion-forming activity... the media outlet failed to observe the fundamental media-ethical obligation to allow the person who was criticized to be heard. For this reason, it is my assessment that *Dagens ETC* cannot avoid a reprimand. The matter is therefore referred to the Swedish Media Ethics Council.”

While I’m happy to see that Swedish media regulation still functions, and while I take pleasure in knowing that the Chief Editor of *Dagens ETC* had to take the time to respond to my complaint and confront my argumentation, what’s truly important here is the opportunity to submit this story to public discourse.

I believe this is a story that reveals quite a lot about the *Zeitgeist* of today. It is about the reincarnation of antisemitic policies of yore in an anti-Zionist, virtue-signaling framing and about the profound moral inversion that the Palestinianist movement has achieved in left-wing discourse, where basic advocacy for Israel and its right to self-defense and, yes, to win wars, are cast as “racist agitation.”

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