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Italy's Far-right Leader Salvini Visiting Israel to 'Whitewash' Record, Critics Say

Some in Italy's Jewish community say it's alarming that Netanyahu will 'provide Matteo Salvini with a pro-Israel license' ■ Israeli left-wing activists call for a protest to disrupt his visit to Yad Vashem

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Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini stands next to a sniper rifle during an event celebrating the state police SWAT team in Rome, Italy, October 10, 2018. Credit: | Remo Casilli/ REUTERS

Italy's Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini is due to arrive in Israel on Tuesday and critics of his far-right, fiercely anti-immigration views in both Italy and Israel are voicing concern.





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Salvini, a close political ally of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, is rapidly establishing himself as Italy's most influential politician and as de facto leader of Europe's populist anti-immigration camp in the run-up to European Parliament elections in 2019.

Salvini's League successfully ran on a nationalist anti-immigration platform promising to put "Italians first," which critics called Islamophobic and xenophobic. Salvini routinely dismisses such charges as baseless, and repeats that his policies are just "buonsenso" (common-sense).

Critics in Italy's Jewish community demand Salvini offer a clear condemnation of both Italy's fascist past and its discrimination against migrants and members of the Roma communities during his trip to Israel. Progressives within Italy's Jewish community have been circulating a letter calling him out on "attitudes and acts of racism in the public discourse in Italy."

Meanwhile, Israeli left-wing activists are calling for a protest against Salvini during his visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. They've promoted the demonstration with a meme showing Salvini's face inside a washing machine with the caption: "Yad Vashem – an Israeli washing machine."

The meme implies Salvini is using the visit to "whitewash" his record in the same way other far-right leaders have allegedly done on recent visits to Israel – notably Orbán, whose visit was met with similar criticism.

However, when a similar call was issued to disrupt Orbán's visit to Yad Vashem last summer, it attracted only a small group of demonstrators at the museum. The Israeli activists promoting the protest at Yad Vashem also sent a defiant letter to the Italian Embassy, in which they quoted a call Salvini made last October to close all "ethnic shops by 9 P.M." as one of the reasons why he deserves a hostile welcome.

Seemingly aware of the challenge his visit faces, Salvini's team enlisted the president of Italy's Union of Jewish Communities, Noemi Di Segni, to join him during his Israel trip. The move, which some see as an attempt to lend Salvini legitimacy, will likely enrage some in the Jewish community who oppose the visit.



Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, left, meets with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in Milan, Italy, August 28, 2018. Credit: Luca Bruno/AP

Di Segni confirmed to Haaretz that she will join Salvini in Israel, specifying that she will definitely be at Yad Vashem. However, she declined to comment and added that her decision to join Salvini should not be subject to media attention.

"Italian Jews are torn between an appreciation of Salvini's pro-Israel stance and concerns over his xenophobic politics," said one Italian Jew from Rome critical of Di Segni's decision to join Salvini, and who wished not to be named. "This is today's dilemma for Italy's Jews," they added.





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Members of JCall Italia, a group of progressive Italian Jews affiliated with the American lobby group J Street, released an appeal criticizing “the Israeli government’s posture vis-à-vis far-right parties and movements in Europe and elsewhere in the world.”

“There is indeed an objective interest of Jews in fighting discrimination even when it does not hurt them directly and immediately,” the statement reads, criticizing the alleged Islamophobic tendencies of right-wing parties supportive of Israel “from Austria to Poland and from Hungary to Brazil.”



Leader of right-wing League party and Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini arrives for a rally in Rome wearing an Italian police jersey, December 8, 2018. Credit: VALESSANDRO BIANCHI/REUTERS

The appeal – endorsed by some 100 Jewish community figures, some of them well-known – also includes an open letter with a list of demands to Salvini relating to his trip to Israel.

For instance, the appeal demands that while he is in Israel, Salvini clearly condemns the “trivialization of the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s by movements and parties belonging to the ethno-nationalistic far right in Italy and Europe.”

The letter also cites a Knesset speech by the president of the Conference of European Rabbis, Pinchas Goldschmidt, in which he criticizes Israel’s alliances with far-right parties in Europe, saying they are looking for a “certificate of purity for their policies.”



Lega party supporters hold a banner reading “Thanks Matteo (Salvini)” during a political gathering at Piazza del Popolo in Rome, December 8, 2018. Credit: AFP

Another statement circulated among Italy’s Jewish community said it is “alarming that [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu is about to provide Salvini with a pro-Israel license.” According to this second statement, sponsored by philosopher and painter Stefano Levi Della Torre, such a “license” could “exonerate him from the suspicions of anti-Semitism while he carries on with his xenophobic, racist campaign and with his alliances with anti-Semitic forces in Italy and Europe.”

However, according to Fiamma Nirenstein, a prominent Italian-Israeli writer and a member of the think tank Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the initiatives critical of Salvini are “simply absurd.

“I consider these initiatives marginal; Salvini and the League were always outspokenly pro-Israel,” she said.





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Salvini's League is staunchly pro-Israel and, defying EU practice if not official policy, his visit does not include a meeting with a Palestinian representative.



In a Washington Post interview last summer, Salvini said he approved of Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the U.S. Embassy there. In an interview with Israeli daily Israel Hayom, fellow League member and Deputy Foreign Minister Guglielmo Picchi said Italy is considering opening a cultural center in Jerusalem, as the Czech Republic recently did.

"I firmly believe the new anti-Semitism will grow out of left-wing populism and radical Islam, not from these kind of conservative movements. Salvini never did anything racist, fascist or anti-Semitic – so why call him that?" said Nirenstein, who served in the Italian parliament for the center-right party of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Nirenstein was tapped by Netanyahu to become Israel's new ambassador to Italy in 2015, but the appointment was later aborted. Her thinking is representative of a portion of the Jewish community that is pleased with Salvini's pro-Israel stance, and she shrugs off accusations that he holds extremists views.

During his two-day trip to Israel, Salvini is expected to meet Netanyahu and dine with former ambassador to the United States and Deputy Minister Michael Oren, as well as holding talks with Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked and Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan.

President Reuven Rivlin received a request for a meeting but declined to meet Salvini. A spokesperson from his office told Haaretz this was because of "schedule issues," not "protocol." Some European diplomats in Tel Aviv believe his decision could be, at least in part, political and quote a recent CNN interview with Rivlin where he spoke critically about Israel's relationships with far-right movements.

Although Salvini's League has no official links to neofascist groups in Italy, the latter are supportive of his policies. In turn, Salvini's own statements do little to dispel concerns that such links might exist. And he often uses expressions that draw on the words of the former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to provoke his critics. He also routinely mocks Italy's famous anti-fascist resistance song "Bella Ciao" to celebrate victories.

"Sovranismo" – from the word "sovereignty" – is a term Salvini likes to use and has recently become popular in Italian public discourse





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to describe the country's new coalition government's policies.

Giuseppe Valditara, the professor and political scientist chosen by Salvini to head the Universities Department within Italy's Education Ministry, called in a book titled "Sovranismo: The Last Hope for Democracy" for the creation of an international "sovranoismo" movement against "globalism." "Sovranismo" by and large refers to the belief that sovereignty should be restored to the people and away from international institutions – notably the European Union.

When Steve Bannon announced the formation earlier this year of the Brussels-based The Movement – a foundation to support far-right parties across Europe – Salvini immediately pledged his support. Valditara sees it as the beginning of the realization of his vision for a movement of international "patriots."

Salvini's League was previously named the Northern League and advocated the separation of Italy's prosperous north from the country's poorer and underdeveloped south.

Since Italy's new coalition government was formed – the first in Western Europe to be led by a coalition of Euroskeptic, antiestablishment populists – Hungarian-born, Jewish-American billionaire George Soros has become a repeated target in public statements by state officials, notably because of his philanthropic work supporting migrants. On Saturday, Salvini slammed Soros during a demonstration in Rome, before warning that the "powers that be" want to "plunder" and impoverish Italy.

In keeping with his election promises, since becoming interior minister Salvini has attempted to block ships that rescue migrants at sea from docking in Italy. In June, Salvini refused to let a search-and-rescue vessel dock in Italy after it had rescued hundreds of migrants near the shores of Libya. His recent security decree was almost entirely dedicated to cracking down on migration.

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