

## Nothing particularly Israeli about xenophobia

**Mail & Guardian**online By David Saks | Mail & Guardian Online –

### Nothing particularly Israeli about xenophobia

What becomes a problem is when that country is depicted as being uniquely guilty of something that occurs to a similar or worse extent in numerous other countries. That is what Heidi-Jane Esakov does in “Jewishness of Israel fuels xenophobia” (June 1). There has certainly been a regrettable upsurge in anti-immigrant sentiment in Israel. On occasion, the expression of this has also taken unacceptably inflammatory forms, sometimes in public statements by senior leaders who should know better. That being acknowledged, however, is there anything about all this that makes the Israeli situation somehow generically different from what is happening elsewhere? One could, for a start, point to the appalling extent to which antiblack racism exists in Arab countries, something that Robert Fisk, hardly a friend of Israel, has recently denounced. It could also be pointed out how, not so long ago, our own country experienced a nationwide wave of xenophobic unrest of a nature far more serious than that now taking place in Israel. Perhaps the phenomenon is best contextualised by drawing attention to anti-immigration concerns in Western democracies such as the European Union countries, Canada, the United States and Australia. There, too, one finds widespread popular resentment over the influx, real or perceived, of illegal foreigners as well as increasingly tough measures (detention, imprisonment and deportation) to deal with it. Nor is this antagonism solely about social benefits, employment and crime issues; frequently, it revolves around national-cultural factors as well. One can debate whether or not the whole concept of national identity has been rendered obsolete by globalisation, but what is happening in Israel is essentially no different from what is happening in many other places. There is rising anti-immigrant sentiment the world over, with serious economic and culturally related antagonism emerging even in the most liberal societies (Norway, the Netherlands). Singling out Israel for special condemnation is therefore indicative of little more than double standards, which is all too typical of the campaign to denigrate that country at every opportunity. – **David Saks, associate director, South African Jewish Board of Deputies**