

Muslims, Jews and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

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Over the last few decades, manifestations of hatred of Jews and Israel have increased in the Arab and Muslim world. This hatred is demonstrated in various ways: in speeches and writings of religious, intellectual and political leaders; in school textbooks and the mass media; and in horrific suicide bombings and other terrorist actions. For example, Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, al-Qa'ida leader Osama Bin Laden, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah organizations all have repeatedly called for Israel's destruction.

For their part, Jewish religious and political leaders, as well as some scholars and journalists, particularly in Israel, have depicted these manifestations of hatred as "Muslim [or Arab] antisemitism." According to them, this antisemitism is inherent in Islam from its origins—not merely in its contemporary militant wings—and has "taken root in the body politic of Islam to an unprecedented degree."¹ Similarly, Christian leaders such as Pope Benedict XVI characterized Islam—not just individual Muslims—as "evil and inhuman" and "violent," while Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University alleged that "Islam's borders are bloody and so are its innards."² Other writers claim that Islam is threatening the "Judeo-Christian civilization."

It is true that extreme or fanatic Muslim groups, such as al-Qa'ida and Hizbullah are determined to fight the "Crusaders and Jews" and destroy Israel. These organizations and other Muslim terrorists have killed many innocent civilians—Christians, Jews and Muslims alike—in the US, Israel and elsewhere. They and some Muslim leaders and writers have indeed employed antisemitic expressions, particularly in connection with the Palestinian and Arab struggle against Zionism and Israel. These expressions, which derive partly from selected Quranic verses and partly from classic Christian antisemitism, have influenced many Muslims in

the Middle East and beyond. But the allegation that Islam, or its mainstream, has been antisemitic, even on a par with Nazism, represents a gross generalization. Such a contention is misleading and contributes to needless suspicion, fear and hatred of Muslims by Jews (and Christians).

According to scholars of Islam, for many centuries antisemitism was foreign to Islam and to Muslims. Professor Bernard Lewis writes, for example:

One important point should be made right away. There is little sign of any deep-rooted emotional hostility directed against Jews...such as the antisemitism of the Christian world. There were, however, unambiguously negative attitudes. These were in part the "normal" feelings of a dominant group toward a subject group, with parallels in virtually any society...⁵

Many Muslims felt antagonism or contempt for Jews (and Christians) who had rejected Islam, which they believed to be the true religion, and its founder, the Prophet Muhammad. Simultaneously, however, Muslims by and large tolerated Jews (more than Christians) as *Ahl al-Kitab* [people of the Book], the original followers of Abrahamic monotheism. Muslim religious and political leaders also granted Jews communal autonomy and treated them as *Ahl al-Dhimma* [protected people]. This was on condition that they did not violate their inferior status in the Muslim state; in such cases, and on other occasions, Jews were harassed and/or persecuted. Otherwise, their conditions varied from place to place and from period to period, depending on political and economic circumstances and ideological factors. But generally, Jews in most Muslim countries were treated fairly or at least tolerably—much better than their brethren in Christian Europe or their Christian neighbors in the Muslim world. One of the main reasons for Muslim preference of Jews over Christians was that unlike Christians, who were identified by Muslims as linked with the threatening Christian Europe, Jews were humble and content with their apolitical, religious rights and economic roles, while demonstrating their loyalty to the Muslim state.

However, with the advent of the Jewish–Zionist national movement in Palestine in the late nineteenth century, the attitudes of Muslim states and of many Muslims to Jews have gradually changed. A growing number of Muslims, mostly Arabs, have come to consider this movement an extension of European colonialism and imperialism, aimed at usurping Muslim Palestine. Although many Muslims distinguished between Zionist and non-Zionist Jews, other Muslims, mostly religious and nationalist leaders, identified their traditional Jewish neighbors with the modern, political Zionist Jews. Consequently, Jews in several Arab countries (and in Palestine) were periodically attacked and even killed by Muslims, some of whom made use of antisemitic motifs in their struggle with the Zionist movement.

When, after defeating five Arab armies, Israel was established in 1948 as a Jewish state, a tragic historical change occurred in Muslim attitudes toward Jews. An even greater number of Muslims, mostly Arabs, now identified their Jewish neighbors with “aggressive” Zionism and Israel. This precipitated the destruction and exodus of local Jewish communities, including ancient ones, such as those in Iraq, Morocco and Yemen, as well as of Egypt and Syria in later years. Rejecting the legitimate rights of the Jewish people to create a state in Palestine, many Arabs and Muslims, notably radical ones, were and remain determined to fight and eliminate Israel. This determination intensified following the humiliating Arab defeat in 1967 and the conquest by Israel of Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian–Palestinian territories, particularly East Jerusalem with its Muslim shrines. The prolonged Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and its claims over East Jerusalem, the Palestinian intifidas of 1987 and 2000 (al-Aqsa intifada) and the Israeli operation in Gaza (2008–2009) — all have enhanced Muslim solidarity with the Palestinians and reinforced hatred of Jews and of Israel.

To be sure, the occupation of Arab territories in 1967 immensely increased the volume of antisemitic manifestations in several Arab and Muslim states, most notably Egypt. Lurid anti-Jewish expressions appeared in official government publications, in journals and newspapers, school textbooks, speeches of political leaders and particularly in sermons of the Muslim clergy. Thus, for example, in 1968 the “Academy of Islamic Research” at the al-Azhar Institute in Cairo convened a large conference with the participation of many religious leaders from the Arab and Muslim world. The conference’s deliberations were permeated by a vitriolic demonization of Jews (and Israel). Jews were depicted as hateful, deceitful, hostile to Muslims, as a people who killed their own prophets, etc. — all these despicable allegations are allegedly derived from the *Quran* and *Hadith*. At that parley, and on other occasions, more anti-Jewish motifs emerged, mainly drawn from traditional Christian antisemitism. These included the idea that Jews are thirsty for non-Jewish blood (blood libels), avaricious (*The Merchant of Venice*), and conspire to control the world (*The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*).

There is no denying the vicious nature of that catalog of antisemitic invective. But this phenomenon has to be seen in its proper context. According to Lewis and other Islamists, this Muslim antisemitism was largely “a function of the Arab–Israeli conflict cynically exploited for propaganda reasons by Arab rulers and intellectual elites. It was something that came from above, from the leadership, rather than from below, from the society, as a political and polemical weapon, to be discarded if and when it is no longer required.”⁴

At this juncture, the following observations should be taken into account: on the one hand, not all leaders in Arab countries, and certainly in non-Arab Muslim

countries, have promoted antisemitic messages among their constituencies. In such countries, before June 1967, mostly in Africa and Asia, antisemitism was an utterly marginal phenomenon, or even non-existent. Since that time, Saudi Arabia and revolutionary Iran (since 1979) spread anti-Israeli and antisemitic propaganda in that part of the world. For their part, the governments of Arab countries that signed peace agreements with Israel—Egypt and Jordan—hardly ever endeavored to combat antisemitism in various media organs, in school textbooks and religious institutions. On occasion, they actually even promoted it. Those regimes sought to avoid antagonizing Islamic and nationalist radical groups and other sections that harp on the popular feelings of antagonism toward Israel's grip on the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Still, despite these anti-Israeli sentiments, a growing number of pragmatic Arab and non-Arab Muslim governments, leaders and groups have recognized Israel and have cooperated with it in various fields. Initially, Muslim countries such as Turkey and Iran, as well as several African states, formally recognized the new Jewish state and established diplomatic relations with it. Their motives were mainly strategic, political and economic, and also took into account their ties with the US.

For similar reasons, from the 1950s, Jordan secretly developed strategic and economic ties with Israel and signed a peace treaty with it in 1994. Significantly, Egypt, which had fought Israel in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1969 and 1973, signed the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1978 and a peace agreement in 1979. Even the PLO, Israel's archenemy, indirectly recognized the Jewish state in 1988 and in 1993 signed the Oslo Peace Accords with Israel.

Following these historic accords, a growing number of Arab and Muslim countries established official diplomatic, strategic and/or economic ties with Israel, such as Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa, Mauritania in West Africa; Oman and Qatar in the Persian/Arab Gulf; and Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan in Asia. Indonesia and Pakistan developed secret relations with Israel. Most of these relations have been supported not only by political and economic elites, but periodically also by Muslim religious leaders and groups, such as two chief muftis in Egypt, and former Indonesian president Abd al-Rahman Wahid, leader of a large Muslim religious organization. He and other Muslim religious leaders visited Israel on various occasions and conducted interfaith dialogues with Jewish religious and intellectual leaders.

However, such initiatives and gestures were discontinued, and diplomatic relations between several Muslim countries and Israel were ruptured or downgraded when Israel adopted somewhat draconian measures against Palestinians and continued

its occupation of Palestinian territories and its rule over East Jerusalem. At this point it should be stressed that despite this occupation, or perhaps because of it, an increasing number of Arab and Muslim leaders and states have come to recognize Israel's existence, or its right to exist within the pre-1967 lines. Most of them have suggested establishing full diplomatic and normal relations with Israel, provided it agrees to the creation of a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, with its capital in East Jerusalem. In fact, such a suggestion was formally and unanimously adopted by all (twenty-two) Arab states and backed by all Muslim states (fifty-seven, including the Arab states). This "Arab Peace Initiative" of March 28, 2002 (in Beirut) *inter alia*:

- 1) Calls on Israel to reconsider its policies and declare that a just peace is its strategic option as well.
- 2) Further calls upon Israel to affirm:
 - full withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the June 4, 1967 lines, and the remaining occupied Lebanese territories;
 - achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee program, to be agreed upon in accordance with UN Resolution 194; and
 - the acceptance of the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state on the Palestinian territories occupied since June 4, 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.
- 3) Consequently, it calls upon the Arab countries to:
 - consider the Arab–Israeli conflict ended and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, thus providing security for all the states in the region; and
 - establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.⁶

Significantly, this historic Arab peace initiative was originally offered by Amir (later King) Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's holiest shrines, those of Mecca and Medina. It was preceded by another Saudi peace initiative in Fez, Morocco, in 1981. In 2008, King Abdallah also inaugurated two interfaith dialogues—in Madrid and New York—that included Jewish rabbis and Israeli leaders. He called *inter alia* for coexistence, peace and harmony, and spoke out against misunderstanding, malice and hatred.⁵

It can be assumed that these Saudi and Arab initiatives and words do not represent a major ideological-theological change in their attitudes to Jews and Israel, but a strategic-pragmatic approach, based on several motives or objectives, mainly:

- to settle the Palestinian problem, lest it contribute to destabilizing the region—and further radicalizing Arab masses (especially following the 2000 al-Aqsa intifada);
- to improve relations with the US pro-Israel government following 9/11, which was carried out by nineteen terrorists, fifteen of whom were Saudis; and
- to contain the growing Iranian–Shi'a menace that is considered more critical than the potential Israeli threat.

But Israel officially rejected the Saudi/Arab peace initiative in April 2002. This was mainly due to the Arab demands to withdraw to the 1967 lines, including East Jerusalem, and to settle the Palestinian refugee problem according to UN Resolution 194. Still, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon subsequently acknowledged the “first seeds of change” and Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer “the positive elements in this initiative.”⁷ In 2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reportedly approached Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas with a peace plan that was for the most part compatible with the Saudi/Arab initiative. But Abbas did not accept that plan, partly because it did not meet all his expectations, particularly regarding the refugee problem (Olmert had suggested that Israel would admit only 3,000 refugees), and partly because Olmert was by then a “lame duck,” and his plan was not presented and approved by the Israeli government.

Due to American pressure, in June 2009 Israel's new prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, accepted for the first time the notion of a “demilitarized Palestinian state,” but without specifying its boundaries. He also rejected the Palestinian claim to East Jerusalem and objected to the return of any Palestinian refugees to Israel. Another precondition set by Netanyahu for reaching an agreement was Palestinian recognition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people.⁸

Undoubtedly, this issue, and certainly the problems of the Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugees and East Jerusalem, are the major obstacles for reaching Palestinian–Israeli, Arab–Israeli and Muslim–Jewish accords. Reaching such accords is likely to be thwarted by both Muslim and Jewish religious militants or fanatics, both using violence. In the worst case scenario, they could ignite a new Muslim–Jewish religious war.

In the best case scenario, however, US President Barack Obama—with his fresh policy toward the Muslim and Arab world and his balanced approach to the

Arab–Israeli conflict—can ultimately induce the relevant parties to reach historic peace and reconciliation between Muslims and Jews, Arabs and Israelis.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Robert S. Wistrich, *Muslim Antisemitism: A Clear and Present Danger* (American Jewish Committee, 2002), p. 2; Daniel Pipes, “The Politics of Islamic Antisemitism,” *Commentary*, August 1981; and Raphael Israeli, *Islamikaze: Manifestations of Islamic Martyrology* (London, 2003).
- ² Ian Fisher, *New York Times*, September 19, 2006; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996), p. 258.
- ³ Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, 1984), p. 32.
- ⁴ As cited by Wistrich, op. cit., p. 1.
- ⁵ Elie Podeh, *From Fadh to Abdallah: The Origins of the Saudi Peace Initiatives* (Jerusalem, 2003) pp. 43–44
- ⁶ *Arab News*, November 13, 2008 and July 18, 2008; *Haaretz*, June 8, 2008.
- ⁷ Podeh, op. cit., pp. 24–25.
- ⁸ *Haaretz*, June 15, 2009.



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