

Intifada II: The Long Trail of Arab Anti-Semitism

Efraim Karsh

FOR ANYONE still disposed to credit the standard Muslim-Arab contention that, so far as Palestine is concerned, Arabs have never had anything against Judaism or Jews but only against Zionism and Zionists, this fall's anti-Israel riots should have gone far to dispel any remaining illusions. And if not the riots themselves, or the wanton destruction of ancient Jewish sites in Nablus and Jericho, then the words accompanying them; and if not the words shouted by frenzied mobs, then the presumably more reflective words articulated by leaders and dignitaries.

To pluck but one example from the flood of high-level anti-Jewish invective, here are a few snippets from a sermon delivered on October 13 by Ahmad Abu Halabiya, former acting rector of the Islamic University in Gaza. The sermon, given the day after the barbaric lynching of two Israeli soldiers in the West Bank city of Ramallah, was broadcast live on the official television channel of Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority:

Have no mercy on the Jews, *no matter where they are, in any country* [emphasis added]. Fight them, wherever you are. Wherever you meet them, kill them. Wherever you are, kill those Jews and those Americans who are like them and those

EFRAIM KARSH, head of Mediterranean studies at King's College, University of London, is the author (with Inari Karsh) of *Empires of the Sand*. His article, "Were the Palestinians Expelled?," appeared in the July-August COMMENTARY.

who stand by them. They are all in one trench against the Arabs and the Muslims because they established Israel here, in the beating heart of the Arab world, in Palestine.

Of course, it has long been a staple of Arab diplomacy that such sentiments themselves are to be understood as an expression of frustration with Zionism, not with Jews or Judaism. After all, did not Arabs and Jews coexist harmoniously for centuries prior to the advent of the Zionist movement? As Fayez A. Sayegh, the Kuwaiti representative, told the United Nations General Assembly during the debate over the "Zionism-is-racism" resolution in November 1975: "We in the Arab world showed hospitality to Jews who came fleeing from persecution in Europe when European anti-Semitism was driving them into our arms; . . . it was only when the Zionists came that, despite our hospitality to the Jew, we showed hostility to the Zionist."

But this idyllic picture is likewise at odds with the historical record. True, persecution of Jews in the medieval and modern Islamic world never reached the scale of Christian Europe. But that did not spare the "Jews of Islam" (to use the phrase of the historian Bernard Lewis) from centuries of legally institutionalized inferiority, humiliating social restrictions, and the sporadic rapacity of local officials and the Muslim population at large. In pre-Zionist Palestine itself, Arab peasants, revolting in the 1830's against a military conscription imposed

by Egyptian authorities, took the occasion to ravage the Jewish communities of Safed and Jerusalem, and when Arab forces arrived from Egypt to quell the insurrection, they slaughtered the Jews of Hebron in turn. A century later, in June 1941, following an abortive pro-Nazi coup in Iraq, the Jews of Baghdad were subjected to a horrendous massacre in which hundreds perished. And so forth.

The truth of the matter is that, for all their protestations to the contrary, Arabs have never really distinguished among Zionists, Israelis, and Jews, and often use these terms interchangeably. As Anis Mansur, one of Egypt's foremost journalists and a one-time confidant of President Anwar Sadat, put it in a moment of candor: "There is no such thing in the world as Jew and Israeli. Every Jew is an Israeli. No doubt about that." Indeed, the fact that Arab anti-Zionism has invariably reflected a hatred well beyond the "normal" level of hostility to be expected of a prolonged and bitter conflict would seem to suggest that, rather than being a response to Zionist activity, it is rather a manifestation of longstanding prejudice that has been brought out into the open by the vicissitudes of the Arab-Israel conflict.

This is hardly to deny the clash of destinies between two national groups. But it is precisely because Zionism was construed as epitomizing the worst characteristics traditionally associated with Jews in the Muslim-Arab mind that the Zionist enterprise could be portrayed in so lurid a light by politicians and intellectuals alike. As Lutfi Abd al-Azim, the editor of a prestigious Egyptian weekly, wrote in 1982, three years after the conclusion of an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty:

A Jew is a Jew, and hasn't changed for thousands of years. He is base, contemptible, scorns all moral values, gnaws on live flesh, and sucks blood for a pittance. The Jewish Merchant of Venice is no different from the arch-executioners of Deir Yasin and those at the [Palestinian] refugee camps. Both are similar models of inhuman depravity.

WHERE DO such vicious stereotypes come from? It has been rightly observed that modern, ideological anti-Semitism is an invention of 19th-century Europe, and that traditionally the Islamic world was by and large free of such "doctrinaire refinements" (in the phrase of the late Elie Kedourie). But the ease and rapidity with which the precepts of European anti-Semitism were assimilated by the Muslim-Arab world testify to the

pre-existence of a deep anti-Jewish bigotry. This bigotry dates to Islam's earliest days, and indeed to the Qur'an itself.

Reflecting the Prophet Muhammad's outrage over the rejection of his religious message by the contemporary Jewish community, both the Qur'an and later biographical traditions of the Prophet abound with negative depictions of Jews. In these works they are portrayed as a deceitful, evil, and treacherous people who in their insatiable urge for domination would readily betray an ally and swindle a non-Jew; who tampered with the Holy Scriptures, spurned God's divine message, and persecuted His messenger Muhammad just as they had done to previous prophets, including Jesus of Nazareth. For this perfidy, they will incur a string of retributions, both in the afterlife, when they will burn in hell, and here on earth where they have been justly condemned to an existence of wretchedness and humiliation.

As this summary suggests, the traits associated with Jews make a paradoxical mixture: they are seen as both domineering and wretched, both haughty and low. But such is the age-old Muslim stereotype—as it is, *mutatis mutandis*, the Christian. Coming to know Jews as a small subject community in their midst, most Muslims held them in the contempt reserved for the powerless. "I never saw the curse denounced against the children of Israel more fully brought to bear than in the East," wrote an early-19th-century Western traveler to the Ottoman empire, "where they are considered rather as a link between animals and human beings than as men possessed by the same attributes." To another contemporary visitor to the region, the Jews' "pusillanimity is so excessive, that they flee before the uplifted hand of a child." That was one side of the picture. As for the other, even Egypt's President Sadat, the man who would go farther than any other Middle Eastern leader in accepting the existence of a sovereign Jewish state, could remind his people in April 1972 of why the Jews had to have been brought so low, and why their power was still to be feared:

They were the neighbors of the Prophet in Medina. They were his neighbors, and he negotiated with them and reached an agreement with them. But in the end they proved that they were men of deceit and treachery, since they concluded a treaty with his enemies, so as to strike him in Medina and attack him from within. . . . They are a nation of traitors and liars, contrivers of plots, a people born for deeds of treachery.

Given the depth of anti-Jewish feeling in the Arab Middle East, it is hardly surprising that some of the hoariest and most bizarre themes of European anti-Semitism should have struck a responsive chord when they made their way there over the course of the centuries. Thus, special derision is reserved in Arab writings (as in Christian ones) for the biblical notion of the chosen people, seen in Anis Mansur's words as the quintessence of "Judaism's perception of the Jews as . . . masters of the universe—its peoples, lands, and skies . . . to whom all other peoples are but servants, undeserving of belief in the Jewish God." To this doctrine is attributed, in turn, the license Jews supposedly take in mistreating non-Jews, with the Talmud characterized as not only condoning but actually requiring acts like the swindling of Gentiles and the "rape of women of other religions."

Then there is the "blood libel," that medieval Christian fabrication according to which Jews use Gentile blood, and particularly the blood of children, for ritual purposes. Imported to the Ottoman empire by Christians in the 15th century, this fantastical charge acquired a mythic status, reaching a peak of popularity in the 19th century. Among the numerous places in which the libel surfaced, and local Jews were made to suffer for it, were Aleppo (1810, 1850, 1875); Antioch (1826); Beirut (1824, 1862, 1874); Damascus (1840, 1848, 1890); Deir al-Qamar (1847); Homs (1829); Tripoli (1834); Jerusalem (1847); Alexandria (1870, 1882, 1901-1902); Port Said (1903, 1908); and Cairo (1844, 1890, 1901-1902).

Although most of these incidents were of Christian manufacture, and although Ottoman authorities often extended help to the persecuted Jews, the libel itself was quickly internalized in the Muslim imagination, where it remains firmly implanted to this day. Thus, in August 1972 King Faisal of Saudi Arabia could confide to the mass-circulation Egyptian magazine *al-Musawwar* that "while I was in Paris on a visit, the police discovered five murdered children. Their blood had been drained, and it turned out that some Jews had murdered them in order to take their blood and mix it with the bread that they eat on that day."

Nor is the blood libel kept alive only by avowed anti-Semites (like King Faisal). Rather, it is prevalent even among scholars and intellectuals. In *Israeli Religious Thought: Stages and Sects*, published by a respectable Egyptian academic press, Dr. Hasan Zaza, a professor of Hebrew at Ein Shams University in Cairo, accepts the veracity of the blood libel despite his awareness that Jewish religious law

specifically forbids the eating of anything containing blood. For how is it possible, he asks rhetorically, that a charge that has been leveled time and again all over the world for so many generations could be just an unsubstantiated rumor?

PERHAPS THE most successful anti-Semitic import of all in the Muslim-Arab world is the theory of an organized Jewish conspiracy to achieve world domination, particularly as spelled out in the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This virulent anti-Semitic tract, which was fabricated by the Russian secret police at the turn of the 20th century, made its appearance in Western Europe during and immediately after World War I. As early as 1918, Chaim Weizmann, traveling in Palestine with the Zionist Commission, was reportedly presented with copies of the *Protocols* by his Arab interlocutors. Translated into Arabic in the mid-1920's, the work has retained its popular appeal to this day, published in numerous editions and in several different translations, including one by the brother of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. (Nasser himself would recommend the pamphlet as a useful guide to the "Jewish mind," as would his successor Anwar Sadat, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, among many others.)

As with the blood libel, the astounding popularity of the *Protocols* is directly related to the millennial disparagement of Jews as treacherous and grasping. According to one venerable strand of Muslim-Arab thought on this subject, what lies behind the supremacist concept of the chosen people is, in fact, a perverse inferiority complex that dates back to biblical times. When the ancient Jewish kingdoms were destroyed, this inferiority complex was transmogrified from a will to occupy neighboring lands into a determination to exert financial, economic, and political control *wherever* Jews lived—an objective that was in fact achieved in many Western countries. Modern Zionism could thus be seen as a reversion to the original form of this same impulse—the impulse, that is, to occupy foreign lands and subjugate their peoples, and to justify doing so by invoking biblical promises.

When, moreover, the Zionists managed to harness international support for their enterprise—in the form of the Balfour Declaration and an endorsement of its pledges by the League of Nations—they utilized (so the argument runs) the same foul methods used against the Prophet Muhammad and other victims of ancient Jewish aggression. "We have known the Jews to be most

tyrannical and despotic," the Jaffa Muslim-Christian Society complained in May 1920 to the district's British military governor, reminding him

of the deeds perpetrated by their forefathers; of the persecution and ill-treatment they meted out to their contemporaries; of what they did to Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them); [and] of what they had been meditating toward the Muslim and Christian nations.

During the 1920's and the 1930's, these and other traditional Islamic perceptions coalesced with themes articulated in the *Protocols* to create a distinctly Middle Eastern version of the theory of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Thus, the prominent Palestinian educator Khalil Sakakini, an Orthodox Christian fully conversant with the surrounding Muslim society, could equate the Zionist enterprise with the crucifixion of Jesus—and also float the newer stereotype of Jewish domination of the great powers, whether the Romans at the time of Jesus or, now, the British. "There is little doubt that the British government is [morally and politically] bankrupt," Sakakini wrote in the 1930's. "Who can have high regard for a government which is totally under the Jewish sway, like a slave?" And, on another occasion: "Isn't there a single European country loathing to be an instrument in Jewish hands?"

Similarly, the Palestinian politician Rashid Hajj Ibrahim warned in the late 1940's that Jewish ambitions ran well beyond Palestine to encompass the entire Middle East. "The Jews covet Egypt," he argued,

because this is Moses' place of origin; they desire Syria and Lebanon—because their Temple was built from Lebanon's cedars; they have set their sights both on Iraq, the birthplace of Abraham the Patriarch, and the Hijaz—Ishmael's birthplace; and they want to have Transjordan because it is a part of Palestine and used to be a part of Solomon's kingdom.

Muhammad Nimr al-Khatib, who wrote an account of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, ascribed the Arabs' defeat in that conflict to their failure to recognize that Jews now exercised worldwide dominion. "The old generation perceived the Jews . . . as a cowardly, avaricious, and submissive group which we could easily throw into the sea," he lamented, but in the modern era the Arabs face an organized evil with tentacles all over the world. "We are not fighting the Jews you know," he went on, but rather "the powers that defeated Hitler and Japan; we are fighting world Zionism, which exploits Truman, enslaves Churchill and Attlee, and

dominates London, New York, and Washington."

Forty years later, in 1988, Syrian president Hafez al-Assad would express the same sentiment in no less explicit terms:

The ambitions of racist Zionism are as clear as the sun. . . . They do not want Palestine alone or a piece of land here or there. They do not want only another Arab country. They want . . . to impose their hegemony beyond that until it covers the entire world.

HA VE THERE been any signs of a diminishment of Arab anti-Semitism as, in the last decade, Israel and its Arab neighbors have ostensibly drawn closer? None whatsoever. Quite to the contrary: Egypt, at peace with Israel for over two decades, may be, today, the world's most prolific producer of anti-Semitic ideas and attitudes. These ideas and attitudes are voiced openly by the extreme Islamist press, by the establishment media, and even by supporters of peace with Israel like Anis Mansur. In numberless articles, scholarly writings, books, cartoons, and public statements, Jews are painted in the blackest terms imaginable.

The traditional blood libel is still in wide circulation in today's Egypt, together with a string of other canards whose tenor may be glimpsed in the title of an 1890 tract recently reprinted by, of all sources, the Egyptian ministry of education: *Human Sacrifice in the Talmud*. Jews have been accused of everything from exporting infected seeds, plants, and cattle in order to destroy Egyptian agriculture, to corrupting Egyptian society through the spread of venereal diseases and the distribution of drugs. Similarly popular are the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which may be in wider distribution in Egypt than anywhere else in the world. In *Protocols* fashion, the hand of "world Jewry" is seen behind everything from the destruction of Russian society to the downfall of former German chancellor Helmut Kohl to the control of world public opinion through the film industry. "We cannot watch a single American movie that does not include dialogue commending the Jews and their beliefs," complains Muhammad Abd al-Mun'im, chief editor of the weekly *Ruz al-Yussef*. "They have transgressed their limits and reached the point of saying that they are superman-creatures and the best to be born on this planet from all of history."

Other Arab parties engaged in negotiations with Israel have done their best to keep up with Egypt's example. In Syria, whose late president supposedly made "a strategic choice" for peace in the mid-

1990's, anti-Semitism remains an integral part of political and intellectual discourse. Particularly favored in Syria is Holocaust denial, another staple of Arab anti-Semitism that is sometimes coupled with overt sympathy for Nazi Germany. Only a few months ago, just as Syrian and Israeli leaders were about to meet in Washington for crucial talks, the official newspaper *Tishrin* published an article by its editor denying the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis.

The same can be said of Yasir Arafat and his Palestinian Authority (PA). Indeed, the seemingly sudden and spontaneous outburst of naked racial and religious hatred since early October of this year is perfectly in line with the PA's systematic effort—flagrantly violating its obligations under Oslo—to instill in its people, and particularly in its young people, an ineradicable enmity not only for the state of Israel but for Jews and Judaism.

As part of this effort, Palestinians have been informed of the most outlandish Jewish plots to corrupt and ruin them—outlandish, but wholly congruent with the medieval myth of Jews as secret destroyers and poisoners of wells. Thus, the PA minister of health, Riad al-Za'anun, has charged Israeli doctors with using "Palestinian patients for experimental medicines," while the Palestinian representative to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva accused them of injecting Palestinian children with the AIDS virus. For his part, the PA minister of ecology, Yusuf Abu Safiyah, indicted Israel for "dumping liquid waste . . . in Palestinian areas in the West Bank and Gaza"—a charge famously amplified by Suha Arafat when, in the presence of Hillary Clinton, she told an attentive audience in Gaza in November 1999 that "our people have been subjected to the daily and extensive use of poisonous gas by the Israeli forces, which has led to an increase in cancer cases among women and children."

In their schoolbooks, Palestinian children learn about an evil Jewish persona, traceable to biblical times, which accounts for the worldwide persecution of the Jews through the ages. They are indoctrinated with the idea that Jews are, and always have been, implacable enemies of Islam, people who "called Muhammad a liar and denied him, [who] fought against his religion in all ways and by all means, a war that has not yet ended until today." The Bible and the Talmud come in for special abuse as the principal sources of Jewish moral depravity, the Bible being "full of texts that support the Jews' tendency to racial and religious zealotry" and the Talmud a racist treatise obliging the Jews to seclude themselves from others even as they infiltrate and ruin the societies in which they live. As one such

textbook, *The New History of the Arabs and the World*, puts it, fabricating a talmudic passage out of whole cloth and with malignant inventiveness:

It is said in the Talmud: "We [the Jews] are God's people on earth. . . . [God] forced upon the human animal and upon all nations and races that they serve us, and He spread us through the world to ride on them and hold their reins. We must marry our beautiful daughters with kings, ministers, and lords and enter our sons into the various religions, for thus we will have the final word in managing the countries. We should cheat [non-Jews] and arouse quarrels among them, then they will fight each other. . . . Non-Jews are pigs who God created in the shape of man in order that they be fit for service for the Jews, and God created the world for [the Jews]."

WHAT THEN of the future? On occasion, it is true, Arab anti-Semitism has coexisted with or even led to a desire to reach an accommodation with the Jews. King Abdallah Ibn Hussein, founder of the Hashemite kingdom of Transjordan and the grandfather of Jordan's late King Hussein, was keen to incorporate the Jewish community in Palestine into his realm, precisely in order to benefit from the Jews' (perceived) worldwide political influence. Anwar Sadat's anti-Jewish prejudice did not prevent him from signing the first-ever Arab peace treaty with Israel.

In most instances, however, Arab anti-Semitism has served rather to exacerbate distrust and hatred of Israel, thus rendering the possibility of real reconciliation ever more remote. The smallest incident can suffice to pierce the thin veneer of official "anti-Zionism," resulting in a torrent of abuse directed not just against Israel and its leaders but against Jews pure and simple—a people, in the words of the Egyptian government daily *al-Akbbar*, who "should not be trusted because they are a nation of vagabonds filled with hatred toward the entire world."

That such reprehensible lies, and much worse, can appear in the official newspaper of a government at peace with Israel for two decades suggests how deeply anti-Semitic bigotry is entrenched in Arab societies. Whatever happens in the specific conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Israel in the coming days and months, for the foreseeable future Muslim-Arab lands seem destined to remain the only regions in today's world where anti-Semitism—not anti-Zionism—still constitutes state policy. And these are the "partners" with whom Israel is now expected to forge a lasting peace.