

The minutiae of racism*

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This article tackles the historical basis and development of the issue of anti-Semitism and examines its perception and impact in the Arab world. The author argues persuasively that anti-Semitism is specific to European racism against Jews. He does not attempt to deflect the term by arguing, as some have done, that Arabs are a Semitic people, but rather unequivocally condemns anti-Semitism and racism of any sort. The author debunks major myths or misconceptions about anti-Semitism and deals frankly with questions of its political utility with regard to Zionism, Israel and Palestine. In the present day, Holocaust denial is unconscionable and, in the end, is not only morally unacceptable, but in the words of the author 'just plain stupid'. The author castigates Arab and Muslim groups which may take such a stance, arguing that the correct response and Arab reaction to the Holocaust was the simple, straightforward and rational one – a European tragedy, but not one for which the Arabs should assume responsibility.

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Anti-Semitism was not born with Israel or with propaganda for or against Zionism. It is much, much older. The term itself dates to Germany of the 1870s, where it was used self-referentially to describe an ideological antagonism towards the Jews of central Europe. Some attribute it to the German activist and preacher, Wilhelm Marr, who in 1879 founded the *Bund der Antisemiten* – the Anti-Semitic League – to combat what he claimed were Jewish designs to destroy German society from within by sowing the seeds of corruption and decadence. He is probably the first publicly to call his organization and himself anti-Semite. Anti-Semitism is thus a modern term coined in a specific context and delineating a specific referent: Jews.

What sense is there in attempts to blur the boundaries of the definition of the term and the phenomenon it identifies by claiming that racism against the Arabs is a form of anti-Semitism because the Arabs are Semites too? Why implicitly acknowledge this racial term as though it were a scientifically sound category, and why subsume racism against other peoples and ethnicities under it? Racism against the Arabs need not be described as 'anti-Semitic' in order to be condemned. Nor did hatred of the Jews in Europe arise because they were Semites. However, anti-Semitism has become a term that subsumes diverse phenomena in a single definition – hatred or its incitement against Jews in Europe by use of religious, ethnic/racial, nationalist or social pretexts. A more recent Zionist trend has been to project the term retroactively across history and horizontally across different cultural contexts.

Anti-Semitism is not the only type of racism that merits condemnation. The genocide perpetrated against the Aztec people and civilization and against other Native American peoples is no less odious, not for being anti-Semitic or not, but rather as a form of colonial racism that dehumanized the indigenous inhabitants.

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Anti-Semitism is an actual, specific, historical and social phenomenon, and to deny its occurrence is to deny reason and the facts of history. Until very recently, it constituted the most widespread and virulent form of racism within Europe. George W. Bush and his followers like to locate contemporary nations within the Judeo-Christian tradition, which they celebrate as the cradle of enlightenment, modernism and liberal democracy. We would do well to remember, however, that this very same cradle also gave rise to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and that, as such, these phenomena could also be understood in the context of so-called Judeo-Christian tradition.

Some Zionist historians have attempted to date anti-Semitism to the ancient Greek and Roman Empires wherein any manifestation of discrimination or hostility towards Jews during the period is accounted as an example of it. However, there is a marked difference between anti-Semitism as a form of racism that targets a specific ethnic group at the exclusion of the others, on the basis of some presumed set of intrinsic traits and the type of religious and tribal xenophobia that may be directed against *all* alien peoples and cultures, of which the Jews were only one, however unique their monotheism may have been. We might also do well to remember that the one God of Judaism was also 'tribal' and 'xenophobic', at least in so far as may be inferred from the text. Ancient Jewish history is not, after all, devoid of instances in which scriptural injunctions were used to justify the extermination of 'heretic' peoples and 'gentiles', 'Philistines' and 'Amalek'. Such attitudes are typical of ancient societies who lacked a concept of humanity, let alone a universalized humanity that might embrace 'the other'.

Anti-Semitism connotes a specific type of animosity towards 'the other' that evolved out of the relationship between Christian Europe and its Jewish inhabitants. Jews were not merely another alien people to Europeans, they were 'the internal other' of Europe par excellence. When we say 'internal' we do mean culturally and geographically, in space and history. Before the Crusades commenced in earnest, zealous holy warriors rampaged through 'Ashkenazi'¹ villages, as contemporary Jewish chroniclers termed them, massacring the inhabitants. Discrimination against the Jews in Europe persisted throughout the Middle Ages in various forms of ostracism and exclusion. Jews were prohibited from owning certain types of property, particularly land, and barred from certain occupations and crafts. An interesting footnote here is that some historians such as Israel I. Yuval in the Jewish Studies Department at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Elhanan Reiner at Tel Aviv University, have attempted to revise readings of the Christian-Jewish relationship in medieval Europe, arguing that there was considerable reciprocity between the two religions in their vilification of the other.²

Whatever the merits of such revisionism it remains perfectly legitimate to argue that religious hatred of the Jews in Europe precipitated an anti-Semitism of a clearly racist stamp, according to which Jews were cast as an inferior race whose mere presence in Europe threatened the purity of the superior 'Aryan' race. Jews were characterized as a corrupting element whose usurious practices were to blame for the impoverishment of the old peasant, aristocratic and professional classes and for the dissolution of their world in the face of ascendant bourgeois values.

In spite of being relatively recent, secular anti-Semitism is difficult to separate from the theological legacy of the Middle Ages and the religious mindset that period. The Jew was not only the embodiment of 'the other', he was the denier of the divine gospel, the rejecter of the New Testament and the redemption. Although Christian

theology maintains a variety of opinions on Judaism, Jewish theology invariably characterizes Christianity as a false messianism, the very antithesis of Judaism.

Although it is not my intention here to discuss modern anti-Semitism at length, it is worth noting that France, which Israel used to accuse of being anti-Semitic in the first term of Chirac's presidency, when public criticism was voiced against Israeli policies in the Arab occupied territories, was the first European country to grant Jews equality under the law. This occurred on 28 April 1791 when the national assembly voted to grant them full rights as citizens. In so doing, the French parliament established the concept of a citizenship that transcends religious affiliations. However, the very same process of secularism and spirit of enlightenment that proposed solutions to the Jewish question also gave birth to modern anti-Semitism. In part this was the product of the reactions of conservative forces against the Enlightenment and what they perceived as the erosion of the values as well as the legacy of the established social order and its systems of obedience. Behind this social and moral decay, they believed, there had to be some internal destructive force at work but one that had no affiliation with the people and their religious values, and the Jews were obvious candidates.

However, anti-Semitism emerged in part, too, from contradictions inherent in the project of the Enlightenment, from Voltaire's³ public contempt for Jews to the rehabilitation of 'race' as a scientific category of understanding and control. Of particular importance are the pseudo-Darwinian theories of race that formed the basis of theories on historical imperatives and many of the social engineering projects of early- and mid-Modernism. There is no doubt that the modern anti-Semitism that this process engendered was one of the most atrocious forms of racism, culminating in the attempt to obliterate the Jews of Europe with the Nazi Holocaust.

Islamic civilization, like other Oriental civilizations, has never harbored an animosity towards the Jews even remotely approaching the level of anti-Semitism. While this does not entitle Eastern civilizations to exculpation from the many massacres committed in their territories, it must be recalled that anti-Semitism is not their creation. It is also true that Islamic history contains many examples of discrimination against religious minorities, although these pale in comparison with the suffering inflicted upon Islamic sects at odds with the dominant theological trend, or the scale of persecution directed at dissidents affiliated with a majority sect but regarded as a threat to the prevailing order.

Israeli attempts to broaden the concept of anti-Semitism in order to retroactively include charges against Islamic civilization are a shameful bid to recast Europe's Jewish victims in the setting of the Middle East conflict in which context Israel is, in fact, the perpetrator rather than the victim. On the other hand we should note that modern Arab political movements, heavily influenced by aspects of European political thought – including National Socialism, early Italian fascism, reactionary concepts imported from late 19th century Russia, communism and liberalism – have also been contaminated by anti-Semitic ideas. When Zionists used the Holocaust to justify the events of 1948 some believed that the response should be to deny that the Holocaust ever took place or to minimize its magnitude. When faced with the crushing defeat of 1967 a belief surfaced that the only way it could have happened was if the enemy was indeed a global evil with tentacles everywhere.

It was in the wake of the 1967 defeat that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – a notorious forgery concocted by Russian intelligence under the Czars and which had

nothing remotely to do with the Arabs – began to circulate widely in the Arab world. More recently, as political Islam benefited from the failure of the prevailing Arab national trend to enshrine its pan-Arab and populist slogans, scattered fragments of imported anti-Semitism have mingled with an anti-Jewish religious animosity substantiated by some Qurʿānic scriptures and contradicted by others.

There are many reasons to criticize certain streams in Arab political culture, not least with regard to how it has dealt with the ‘Jewish question’ and often failed to distinguish between the Jews and Zionism. This latter blurring of distinctions is precisely the thing Israel needs in its deliberate attempts to confuse criticism of Zionism with anti-Semitism. In posing as the historic representative of world Jewry and the mouthpiece of Jewish suffering, it has been necessary for Israel to ‘Zionize’ that suffering much in the same way that it retroactively amalgamated the diverse histories of Jewish communities into a single national/Zionist history.

What, one should ask, is to be understood from the bombings of synagogues in Turkey? Is it not self evident that the target is a religion and does that not make the Middle East conflict appear to be a religious one? Perhaps the perpetrators of those acts believe it is, but that is not how the majority of Arabs and Muslims think. The majority of Arabs and Muslims do not believe that their conflict is with the Jewish religion, or any other religion for that matter. Nevertheless, Israeli propaganda, reinforced by the rhetoric and acts of some Islamic forces steeped in fundamentalism, asserts that Jews are being targeted because they are Jews. Thus is it that the Arab-Zionist conflict becomes an Islamic-Jewish conflict. Such are the underpinnings of the contention by Israeli ideologues and politicians that the source of the spread of anti-Semitism has moved from Europe to the Islamic world.

It must be stressed that engaging in the process of self-criticism outlined above does not contradict the following facts: first, that anti-Semitism is a European phenomenon that reached its apex at the hands of the Nazis; second, that the most prevalent form of racism in the West today is not anti-Semitism but the targeting of Arabs and Muslims; third, that not all anti-Semites are anti-Israel, which has been posited as the solution to Europe’s ‘Jewish question’ or, alternatively, which has been held up as a model of the militaristic nation-state; and fourth, that the Western political and intellectual traditions that have been and remain staunchly opposed to anti-Semitism are, today, among the harshest critics of Israeli policy and the Israeli occupation.

Israel has been systematic in its attempt to portray any criticism of Israel or Zionism as a form of anti-Semitism, sufficiently so as to have propagated a climate of intellectual terror. But it is also consummately pragmatic and has been very selective in whom it calls to account. Thus Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who exonerated Mussolini from having contributed to the death of Italian Jews by sending them on ‘a picnic in the north’, has so-far escaped Israel’s wrath. But then Berlusconi is useful, in spite of the fact that the Italian historian Primo Levi was one of those sent on that ‘picnic’ to Auschwitz. Jacques Chirac is altogether different: the charges Israel is levelling against him have nothing to do with hatred of Jews, of which there is no evidence, and everything to do with his criticism of Israel.

Many organizations have been founded to hunt down and bring to account the authors of statements deemed anti-Semitic. Since the majority of the world’s organized Jewish communities are ardent supporters of Israel there has been an increasing tendency to regard criticism of Israel as a manifestation of anti-Semitism

even when much harsher criticisms emerge from within Israel itself. This is one of the factors that has exacerbated the Palestinian question. Israel bemoans global concern for the Palestinian cause and accuses the world of bias every time there is an outcry against its practices in the occupied territories.

To the Palestinians this international attention would be a source of strength if they were to take appropriate advantage of it through a liberal, democratic – and inevitably anti-Zionist – discourse. Historically, though, it has constituted a source of weakness. International attention is focused on the Palestinian question, after all, not because of the Palestinians but the Jews, (and oil of course) and the place the Jewish question occupies in the Western memory and conscience. One consequence of this perspective has been a tendency to treat the situation in Palestine not as one involving an occupying power and a people under occupation but as a dispute between two equal and opposing parties. It is a convenient formula that allows official Europe to skirt the issue of Israel as a colonial phenomenon, although it means that the harshest criticism it can possibly level against Israel is akin to the exasperated attempts of an ever-forbearing mother to keep her spoiled and impetuous child from hurting itself while enduring stings of its curses and insults.

In one sense, then, the Palestinian issue has been the subject of global focus on the Middle East ever since the Balfour Declaration; conversely, were it not for global attention there would not have been Palestinian cause, or it would have been resolved a long time ago in the way other colonial issues have been resolved. The Palestinian problem arose precisely when other peoples were gaining independence, and it grew more intractable as other issues were finding resolution. While certain Palestinian elites might benefit from the ‘Palestinian-cause industry’, the Palestinian people themselves are not to be envied for the excessive global attention they attract.

It is possible for Palestinians to free themselves from the entanglement of the Palestinian and Jewish questions and the global attention they attract only by wishful thinking. Realistically, the issue can only be handled by rejecting anti-Semitism, which entails the rejection of supposedly clever attempts to argue the justice of the Palestinian cause on the basis of some ‘absolute evil’ from which others have suffered in the past. Such thought and discourse must also reject Israel’s attempts to use anti-Semitism to silence any voice raised against its policies and practices. Israel, we must insist, is not immune to the charge of racism.

Semitic semantics

Israel’s official propagandists, Zionist organizations, and a chorus of affiliated pressure groups are up in arms. They want anti-Zionism branded anti-Semitic. They also denounce Islam’s perceived hostility to Judaism, using the activities and literature of Islamic fundamentalist movements to overplay the religious aspect of the national anti-occupation conflict in Palestine.

The new trend was evident at a special hearing of the Israeli parliament commemorating, for the first time, Anti-Semitism Day, held on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on 27 January.⁴ The debate focused on ‘the new types of anti-Semitism’. Almost all those present – the Knesset speaker, the prime minister, and the justice minister included – agreed that the old right wing and fascist types of anti-Semitism have abated. Those who spoke in the session were eager to link anti-Semitism to

Islamic fundamentalism, to the movements of solidarity among the Palestinian people and to Europe's Left. Ariel Sharon came up with yet another gem of a statement:

Europe has to admit to itself and the entire civilized world that the microbe of anti-Semitism is back and spreading at an alarming pace. Frequently, it appears in the form of disputing the legitimacy of the Jewish state ... Hostility to Israel and reservations on its policy are being used to justify subversive assaults in universities and governments and acts of violence against Jews.

Even from a Zionist point of view, Sharon's speech was poorly written and not quite representative of the propaganda Israel normally wishes to spread. The inflammatory generalizations about Islam and the European Left made by Justice Minister Yosef Lapid in the same session were equally inept. In sum, the session represented a pathetic effort to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

More refined and level-headed liberal Zionists often argue that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic, but for another reason. For them, anti-Zionists deny the right of self-determination to the Jewish people while granting it to others, and this, they claim constitutes anti-Semitism. As admitted, anti-Semitism is hatred of Jews in particular, not of all Semites, and as contested above, it is a nineteenth-century German concept that thrived in the European context for a variety of reasons. But the denial of the national character of Jewishness and the denial of being 'a nation like all nations', with a secular right of self-determination and statehood was part of an internal Jewish political, ideological and religious dispute.

There is no proof that anti-Zionism is a new form of anti-Semitism or a modern form of hatred of Jews. The opposite is true. A majority of Jews in the past, and a substantial part now, have never been Zionists and have never supported the Zionist movement or its call for self-determination – a concept initially used by the Zionist Left to explain Zionism to itself and to others. Many anti-Semitic people are not anti-Israeli, and most of Israel's critics in Europe speak out against various forms of racism and occupation, *including* anti-Semitism. These are all historic facts that debunk the Zionist assertion. However, this is not all as there is a theoretical contradiction inherent in the claim that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic. As surprising as it may seem, anti-Zionism, as an intellectual ideological view, started out as a *Jewish* phenomenon. This is why, as will be seen, it cannot be considered anti-Semitic.

The type of animosity Palestinians and Arabs, among others, feel towards Zionism is one which stems from origins in political conflict. It is not based on ideology or theoretical arguments, nor is it directed at Zionism as a *Jewish* phenomenon, only as a *colonial* phenomenon. Palestinian political struggle and resistance to occupation did not evolve because the occupiers were Jewish, or even Zionists, but simply because they were *occupiers*. The religious and ethnic identity of the occupiers has nothing to do with how people react to occupation except in portraying the image of the occupier as enemy. One cannot assume that the struggle and resistance would have been any less fierce had the settlers not been Jewish. This applies for the phase of struggle when the Palestinians and Arabs took exception to the establishment of a Jewish state at the expense of the Palestinians in 1948, just as it applies for the period of struggle following Israel's occupation of Arab land in 1967. Had the occupiers been from another ethnic or religious group, other religious symbols might conceivably have been used to rouse the nation against the occupiers.

The anti-Zionism of Palestinians and Arabs ought to be viewed in the context of conflict and anti-colonialism. Slanderous words may be borrowed from the arsenal of

Western anti-Semitism, but this does not transform the struggle into an anti-Semitic one. While television cameras may periodically get an anti-Jewish sound-bite from those who live under occupation, siege, and the constant harassment of various types of colonial persecution, this does not constitute anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is the persecution of the Jews as a minority, not the exchange of vitriol between occupiers and those who live under occupation. Racist statements are unacceptable in any context, even that of occupation, but what must be stressed is that the *real* context is not one of anti-Semitism but one of occupation where the Israelis are occupiers.

As mentioned previously, original anti-Zionism is mainly a Jewish phenomenon by definition and not anti-Semitic given that the first theoretical rebuttal of Zionism came out of Jewish communities as so did the first political action taken against it. Anti-Zionism, in its first expression, was religiously and theologically motivated because Zionism, in the consideration of the Jewish institution and its theologians, is a *secular* theory of salvation aiming to hijack the divine course. It is a counterfeit messianism interfering with God's work, a short-cut to the pre-ordained finale, the return of the messiah and the redemption. Diaspora Jews were yearning for a biblical saviour, but Zionism sought to take matters into its own hands. Zionism, in the eye of Orthodox theology, was a secular movement, and even worse, it was an attempt to secularize Judaism and transform the Jews from 'the chosen people' into a worldly nation, 'like all nations'. It corrupted the inherent exceptionalism of the 'chosen people'.

The hostility of the religious Jewish establishment to Zionism took virulent forms. Orthodox Jewish movements never embraced Zionism, not in the way the Mefdal Party (the national religious party in Israel) does, not in the way the settlers do, the latter having turned Zionism into a redemption movement in the religious sense and conferred upon it a religious role it itself did not know. What Orthodox Judaism did was adapt to Israel's political and partisan reality to the reality of occupation to the benefit of the religious right wing. Some religious movements, such as the American Habad movement, while not Zionist, felt certain affinity for Zionism's messianic intimations, nevertheless, as a whole, Orthodox theological doctrines remain anti-Zionist to this day.

Another source of anti-Zionism is linked to the disproportionate role of Jews in the ranks of Europe's radical Left, particularly in Communist movements. Their main criticism was that Zionism is a movement favoured by the Jewish bourgeoisie, one bent on dividing the revolutionary classes on a sectarian or national basis. Debate ensued in Leftist circles on the definition of nationalism and whether or not it applies to Judaism. This debate did not take place between Arabs and Zionists, but between Jewish Bolsheviks and Jewish Bunds.

My own view is that the radical anti-Zionism of the Jewish Left did not solely emanate from defining it as a 'class enemy', but from the fact that it had a liberation scheme of its own—a collective ideology aiming to bring about justice on earth and, thus, save the Jews along with all other minorities. This universal doctrine of salvation or redemption conflicts with the exclusive nature of the Jewish salvation doctrine. Some researchers have argued that both theories share the same roots and inspiration. Some veteran Israeli politicians, who have internalized the ideological debate of that era, claim that history has vindicated Zionism as opposed to Communism. In any case, the entire debate took place in the circles of Jewish communities in Europe.

At the outset of Zionism, divisions tore apart families and friend; emotions ran high between those advocating Communism and those favouring Zionist socialism.

The debates were as fierce as any emerging in the course of party divisions and civil disturbances. Zionists were accused of collaborating with anti-Semites to empty Europe of Jews. They retorted that the anti-Zionists aim was to absolve Nazism. None of these charges stuck, but they demonstrate the trauma and the deep wound in the Jewish consciousness caused by the rise of Zionism.

Liberal Jews in democratic countries were just as divided. Some saw Zionism as a nationalist movement encroaching on individual rights. Others tolerated the Zionist idea and state, without immigrating to it or turning Zionist themselves. Still others supported Zionism as a national movement aiming to create a Jewish democratic state. To do so, this latter group conveniently overlooked the existence of Palestinians and the implications of this selective amnesia last to this day.

Generally speaking, most organized Jewish communities around the world really embraced Zionism only after the 1967 war. Until that time, most Jews were neither Zionist nor anti-Zionist. Most had doubts about the apparent viability of the adventure. However, the Arabs' penchant for getting defeated, so catastrophically demonstrated in 1967, saved the day for the Zionists. The same period that witnessed the rise of anti-Semitic literature in the Arab world also witnessed the acceptance of Zionism by world Jewry at large.

We do not know how non-organized Jewish citizens feel as their views are generally not expressed as 'Jewish' in the public domain. Jews enrolled in organizations and organized communities have largely become friends of Israel and Zionism, out of camaraderie perhaps, but also because the Zionist project succeeded in the sense that it is no longer seen as a crazy adventure. This project proved beneficial for Western public opinion, for capitalist enterprise, and for nations – the United States, in particular. Israel was embraced by the West because it became a viable political and economic investment. The formula was brilliant: a victim that fights back, an underdog with muscle-power. Victim or underdog status alone was not enough, but it was this blend of victimization and strength that worked like a charm for Israel.

Ways of denial⁵

The Nazi Holocaust aimed to rid Europe of its 'Jewish taint'. By this, what was meant was *banking* capital as opposed to industrial capital (*raffendes gegen schaffendes Kapital*) and the moral degeneracy, lack of patriotism, scorn for national values and heritage and other such ills caused by the 'worm' that ate away at all that was noble and pure in the Germanic people. That 'worm' was the racial strain that never belonged, that was intrinsically alien and that nevertheless insisted on remaining in order to spread its pollution; it was European Jewry and its various manifestations including financial capitalism, Communism and Liberalism, and its mere presence, according to this diabolical system of Nazi thought, that were a scourge to racial purity.

Late capitalism, as forcefully imposed by the centralized bureaucratic state, economic crisis and mass unemployment, which were perceived as a national humiliation resulting from the peace terms dictated to Germany by nations after World War I, was explained by German right-wing propaganda as a Jewish conspiracy, and was further elaborated in Nazi propaganda as being a result of communist, liberal and Jewish internal betrayal. This converged with a fanatical, rabidly xenophobic and highly ideological late nationalism of the 'vesrspaeteten Nationen' that had a history of religious anti-Semitism dating back to the Middle Ages

and the Crusader expeditions that had attacked Jewish villages in central Europe en route to Palestine. It was a religious exclusionism that targeted both Muslims and Jews in Andalusian Spain and that shaped part of European identity in terms of both an external determinant – the Muslims – and an internal determinant – the Jews.

But the Nazis' obsession with the annihilation of the Jews was also fired by an ideology that incorporated totalitarian social engineering, founded upon Social Darwinism and assorted recent 'physiological discoveries' that were applied to human beings, together with a populist romantic socialism that was hostile to Communism, Democratic Socialism and Liberalism, all regarded as alien to the 'Volksgeist'.

This form of pseudo-scientifically justified and coldly executed mass extermination would not have been possible without a strong ability to compartmentalize the role of the bureaucratic functionary and the duty to obey orders, on the one hand, and the individual and his private moral sphere, on the other, a phenomenon that is one of the characteristics of the modern state apparatus. Nor would it have been possible without all the business of documentation, recording and archiving, which is also a characteristic of the modern state.

The irony of all this pseudo-scientific human taxonomy and the obsessive documentation of the names, addresses, confiscated possessions and physical details of the people who were rounded up and freighted to the concentration camps and from there to the gas chambers is that this paperwork has become the most important primary historical source for the Holocaust and the most important instrument with which to refute the claims of those who deny it occurred or belittle its magnitude.

It is not so much the sheer numbers of victims that distinguishes the Holocaust. As unique as it was in the twentieth century, millions of native inhabitants were exterminated en masse in the Americas over the course of previous centuries. Neither was it merely a question of scale: many more millions died over the course of World War II alone than in the Nazi gas chambers and these included Russians, Germans, Poles, French, Italians and many other nationalities. The true horror of the Holocaust resides not only in the deliberate singling out of entire peoples – Jews and Gypsies – for extermination and in the scale of this crime, but also in the totality of the target and the 'rational' way in which it was carried out.

Jews were snatched from their homes amid the general silence of their neighbours, a silence interspersed with hatemongering by anti-Semitic groups and by the active complicity of informers. Most of the Jews who died in the concentration camps were not Zionists; in fact, many may not have even heard of Zionism. Moreover, the role of the Zionist movement in saving Jews, or in conspiring with the Nazis, was very marginal, regardless of the number of studies that have been produced about both cases and regardless of the fact that most of their findings have been corroborated. Zionism did, indeed, have two faces; it is the perspectives and aims of the researchers that were and will remain at odds.

The Zionist movement began, and had set its sights on Palestine, long before the Holocaust. Zionists only used the Holocaust to justify their national project in hindsight, even if that justification is what drove some Arabs to deny the existence of the Holocaust. Yet, while there are people who have felt that by minimizing or even refuting the Holocaust they undermine Jewish claims to a state in Palestine, the majority among educated and informed Arab opinion has never denied the Holocaust or the existence of anti-Semitism in Europe. Rather, they have argued, correctly, that since this horror took place in Europe, the Palestinians should not have to pay the price.

Although it existed vaguely as a blend between the residue of a religious culture and extremist nationalist ideas imported from Europe even in its early stages, anti-Semitism in the sense of hostility towards the Jews only began to spread significantly in the Arab world in the form of cultural and intellectual output after 1967. Clearly, the rise of this phenomenon coincided with the rise of a metaphysical attitude that sought to explain the overwhelming Arab defeat of that year in terms of the confrontation with an absolute evil bent on a global conspiracy of the sort of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, which has been proven to be an invention of the Russian Secret Service at the end of the nineteenth century, but which nevertheless found many gullible ears in the Arab world in the wake of the 1967 defeat. Holocaust denial similarly emerged during this period and in the same spirit of a fantastic conspiracy theory that ascribed to an international Jewish cabal the power to invent and dupe the entire world into believing a stupendous set of lies.

I would like to suggest that there are two types of Holocaust denial. One, espoused by elements of the European traditional Right and neo-ultra Right, is to deny that it happened. This form has not acquired sufficient roots to become a determinant for the behaviour of nations and societies. The other form of denial is to ignore that the Holocaust occurred within a particular historic context and, hence, to deal with it as some fiendish aberration that somehow occurred outside the bounds of time and place. One major consequence of this approach is that it inhibits the study of the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon and as a sobering primer on the dangers of racism, extremist nationalist chauvinism and totalitarian social engineering in modern mass societies.

However, Holocaust denial can assume another guise, and that is it can be reduced to an instrument for realizing political ends. Instrumentalization of such a grand event in history is approximately a denial. The Zionist movement has excelled in this, its rituals and rhetoric in commemoration of Holocaust victims far outstripping its concern for the victims and its activities to combat the phenomenon when it occurred. In fact, the subject was not even on the agenda of the Jewish organized community, the ‘Yeshov’, in mandate Palestine during the war years and many Zionists at the time found it embarrassing to hear of Jews being dragged off to be slaughtered without putting up a resistance; it conflicted with the nationalist fighting spirit and the image of the new Jew, the new Hebrew soldier they were trying to inculcate. It was not until the Eichmann trial that the embarrassed silence was broken and emotions suddenly gushed forth.

In the course of Zionism’s attempts to portray the history of the entire Jewish people as one uninterrupted stream of oppression and persecution that culminated inevitably in the Holocaust, Holocaust history has been transformed into an exclusively Israeli property. Victims of the Nazi gas chambers have been nationalized and converted, in spite of themselves, either into an episode in the Zionist struggle to create a state or into an instrument for blackmailing others into supporting Zionist aims or for justifying the crimes the Zionist state perpetrates against others. It is as though the magnitude of the crime entitles Israel to play the victim par excellence or the victims’ sole proxy, placing it beyond reproach or accusations of wrongdoing because *it is the victim by definition*.

The Zionist casting of all Jews as victims of Nazi atrocities has given rise to two curious phenomena. The first is that any Israeli can speak and act as the victim even

if he has more in common ideologically and psychologically with the offender or the 'Capo' – the Jews who cooperated with the Nazis in the concentration camps. In other words, the mere fact of being born to a Jewish mother somehow grants license to represent all victims, including in front of those who are actually more victimized and more hostile to Nazism, racism and its offshoots. The second phenomenon is the monopoly claimed by the Israeli ruling establishment to speak on behalf of Jews and Jewish history in general, which largely translates into soliciting, and pressuring for, political and financial support for Israel.

In the first instance, the challenge of truly understanding and learning lessons from the Nazi phenomenon is reduced to something akin to a therapy session in which those in the role of victim help those in the role of perpetrator purge their guilt by satisfying the psychological and material demands of the former. There is something morally repugnant in this passing of the sins, or innocence, of the fathers to the sons, as opposed to engaging in an objective process of historical investigation with the aim of combating racism in all forms and in all societies. After all, the main victims of European racism today are not Jews, and in Palestine Zionism is not the victim but the perpetrator. Unfortunately, the Israeli-German therapy sessions ignore such stark realities and, in so doing, offer both the Israelis and the Germans *carte blanche* to vent their racism on others, as though the Holocaust were a purely German-Israeli concern and the greater phenomenon of racism something else entirely. It is as if through their mutual catharsis with regard to the former they exonerate themselves from responsibility for the latter.

Meanwhile, Zionism's unwarranted, illogical and historically unsubstantiated monopoly in the role of spokesperson for all Holocaust victims' sits well with Europe. Most of Zionism's aims and demands do not require Europe to engage in a serious process of introspection in order to uproot the deeper causes that gave rise to the Holocaust in the first place. Contrary to what one might logically expect, this also suits Zionism's purposes because it keeps the monolithic discreteness of the Holocaust intact and diminishes, in comparison, the significance of Europe's other crimes. The upshot is to throw the entire Jewish question outside Europe and dump it in the Middle East. It may come as a relief to European officials to be able to exonerate themselves for the Holocaust by placating Israel with displays of anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab and even anti-Muslim sympathies. If anything, however, this form of behaviour confirms the continuation of the underlying syndrome, a syndrome that is nevertheless glossed over with a new, clean bill of moral health, authorized and stamped by Israel after every visit of atonement a European leader makes to the Yad Vashim Museum in Jerusalem.

It is for this reason that all victims of racism across the world should campaign to break the Zionist hold over the role of spokesman for victims of the Holocaust. Conversely, Arabs and Palestinians who deny the Holocaust could offer European and Zionist racism no greater gift than this very denial of the occurrence of the Holocaust. What possible Arab or Islamic interest can it serve to even offer to exonerate Europe of one of the worst chapters in its history? To do so is not only to absolve Europe of a crime that was, in fact, committed, but also to earn its contempt and to wake up one day to find Europe and Israel joining forces against Arab or Muslim Holocaust deniers with such venom that one might imagine that the Holocaust had occurred in Egypt or Iran and that Holocaust denial is a far graver crime than the perpetration of the Holocaust itself. Holocaust denial is not only morally unacceptable it is also just plain

stupid. Furthermore, Israel will be deft in turning the provocation against its regional adversaries who had nothing to do with the Holocaust.

In another regard, the Holocaust is a phenomenon that merits proper scholastic study, the purpose of which is to sort fact from fiction and myth from reality. No incident in history lies beyond the realm of historical research. This said, Tehran can hardly be said to have a tradition of Holocaust studies; the subject does not rate very high in Iranian academic priorities. A conference in Tehran that was preceded by a political speech denying the Holocaust cannot be considered to be an *academic* conference; it was a political demonstration, one that harms Arabs and Muslims and serves only the ultra-Right and neo-Nazi forces in Europe and the Zionist movement.

During World War II, when some Arabs and other Third World peoples were cheering Germany on because it was fighting the French and British colonial powers, the Arab and Third World Left, which had allied with the Soviet Union, argued that it was wrong for the victims of racism to side with the racist Nazi regime. Their position was correct. Today, there is not even a pragmatic immoral justification of any sort for siding with European racism. Holocaust denial does *not* undermine the moral justifications advanced for the existence of the state of Israel as some imagine. However, what it does is tender to the European Right and Israel a convenient enemy upon which to focus and unload their problems. This enemy comprises Palestinians and Arabs, specifically fundamentalist Muslims – those whom Bush is fond of calling ‘Islamic fascists’.

The initial Arab reaction to the Holocaust was simple, straightforward and much more rational. The Holocaust occurred, but it was a tragedy for which the Europeans and not the Arabs should assume responsibility. This is the opinion that prevailed throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the same one conferred by the normal sentiment that yet continues to survive in all of us.

Notes

1. Ashkenaz was the name given in the Hebrew of the Middle Ages to what would be today’s Germany.
2. See the works of Israel I. Yuval at The Hebrew University, Ora Limor and Elhanan Reiner at Tel-Aviv University, and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin from the Ben Gurion University on the Jewish–Christian relations in the Middle Ages and early modernity. Of special interest is the Edition of *Sepher Ha-Nizzahon*, an anti-Christian polemic work by Yom-Tov Lipmann Mühlhausen, ca. 1410, a German-Israeli cooperation with Alfred Haverkamp (University of Trier) and Alexander Patschovsky (University of Konstanz), sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).
3. For racist world views of Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Kant and even John Lock, see Gray (2005, pp. 36–47) and Popkin (1980, pp. 85–89). For a general critique of the Enlightenment in this context see Adorno and Horkheimer (1979).
4. Knesset session on the 27 January 2005. The writer was then a Knesset member.
5. Published originally in: *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 22 December 2006.

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