

Islamic Antisemitism Drives the Arab-Israeli Conflict

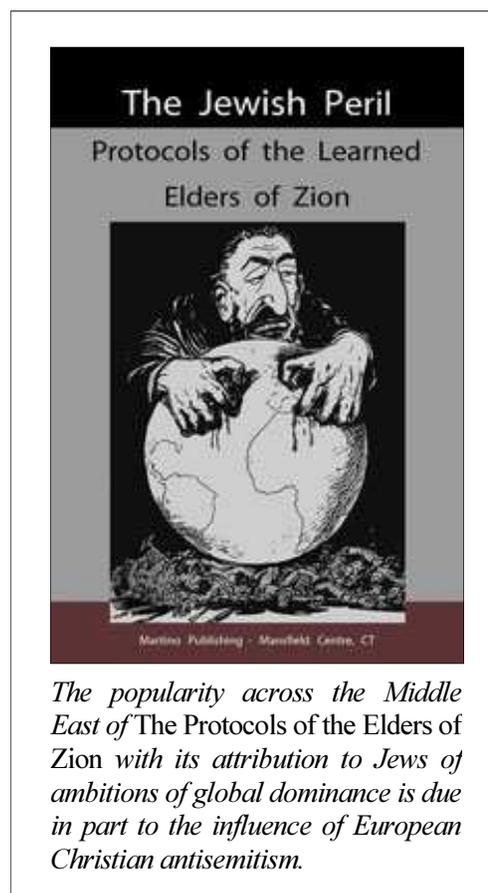
by Mark Durie

An underestimated, unappreciated, and oft-denied driver of the Arab-Israeli conflict is Islamic religious antisemitism. How deeply entrenched is this religious bigotry, and can it prevent, or slow down, the nascent reconciliation between Israel and the Arab world?

Some might question whether it is justifiable to speak of “Islamic antisemitism” and view this charge as a slur on the name of one of the world’s great faiths, followed by close to two billion people. Yet the numerous passages in Islam’s canonical sources (the Qur’an and Sunna) that depict the Jews as a warmongering, cowardly, and treacherous lot have played a key role in the perpetuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as evidenced among other things by the outpouring of antisemitic hate speech during and after the May 2021 Hamas-Israel war.

Two Views on Muslim Antisemitism

In 1992, Daniel Pipes, reflecting on antisemitism in the Muslim world, summarized two different perspectives: one views this phenomenon as a “longstanding” part of Islam; the other considers it “an



importation from Christianity, from Europe.”¹

¹ Daniel Pipes, “The New Anti-Semitism,” *My Brother's Keeper: World Conference on Anti-Semitism and Prejudice in a Changing World* (Brussels: World Jewish Congress, 1992), Jonathan R. Cohen, ed., July 6-8, 1992, available at www.danielpipes.org.

The importation thesis—most prominently associated with Bernard Lewis—is at least partly true. The paranoid attribution of exalted ambitions of global dominance to Jews, reflected in antisemitic statements by some Muslims, was indeed an import from Christian Europe. Testimony to this influence has been the perennial popularity across the Middle East of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the notorious pamphlet published by the Russian secret police in the early twentieth century. In 2001-02, this fabrication was even turned into an Egyptian TV miniseries, *Horseman without a Horse*. But Lewis went further and claimed that the whole of Islamic anti-semitism was imported:

For most of the fourteen hundred years or so of the Arab-Jewish encounter, the Arabs have not in fact been anti-Semitic as that word is used in the West ... because ... they are not Christians.²

By way of reinforcing this thesis, Lewis argued that manifestations of Muslim anti-semitism have no foundation in Islam. As he put it:

In Islamic society, hostility to the Jew is non-theological. It is not related to any specific Islamic doctrine, nor to any specific circumstance in Islamic sacred history. For Muslims, it is not part of the birth pangs of their religion, as it is for Christians. It is rather the usual attitude of the dominant

² Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 117.

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to the subordinate, of the majority to the minority.³

What the importation thesis ignores, however, is that the ease with which the precepts of European antisemitism were assimilated by the Muslim world testifies to Islam's deep anti-Jewish bigotry dating to its earliest days, and indeed to Muhammad himself.⁴

Qur'anic Antisemitic Stereotypes

Having fled his hometown of Mecca to the northern site of Medina in 622, Muhammad sought to woo the local Jewish tribes to his new religion only to meet with unexpected, stiff resistance, which Islamic tradition attributed to “envy, hatred, and malice, because God had chosen His apostle from the Arabs.”⁵ In his influential *Life of Muhammad*, the eighth century Muslim historian Ibn Ishaq called the rabbis “men who asked questions”—a perceived negative trait—who “stirred up trouble against Islam to try to extinguish it.”⁶

This hostility, which culminated in the destruction of Medina's Jewish tribes and the subjugation of the Jews of the northern Arabian oasis of Khaibar, was an integral part of Islam's “birth pangs” as manifested in its two canonical authorities—the Qur'an and the Sunna (the latter comprising the practices

³ Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 85; see, also, Esther Webman, *Anti-Semitic Motifs in the Ideology of Hezbollah and Hamas* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1994), pp. vii-viii.

⁴ Efraim Karsh, “The Long Trail of Islamic Antisemitism,” *Israel Affairs*, Jan. 2006, p. 2.

⁵ Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 239.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

and teachings of Muhammad and his companions)—both of which are rife with verses and traditions stigmatizing the Jews as treacherous and accursed pact breakers. Antisemitism is also integral to the Qur’an’s replacement theology that sees the Jews as rejected by God. The Qur’an states that “the Book, the judgement, and the prophet-hood” were taken away from those who “disbelieve in it” (i.e., the Jews), and “entrusted to a people who did not disbelieve in it” (i.e., the Muslims). All honors, including the title *nabi* (prophet) were reassigned to Muhammad (Sura 3:79).⁷

Indeed, to this day, Qur’anic antisemitic stereotypes and stories from Muhammad’s life involving Jews are passed on to Muslim children as part of their Islamic formation. Thus, for example, a major textbook written for American Muslim schoolchildren devotes several chapters to the history of the Jews, including an entire chapter on the Battle of the Ditch (627 C.E.) that celebrates the resulting massacre of the Medina Jews as a great advance for the Muslims. The book explains that all pure-hearted Jews will become Muslims, concluding that the Jews

earned the wrath of Allah for their disobedience and as Allah said: there will be enemies who will attack them

⁷ For Islam’s inherent antisemitism, see Andrew Bostom, *The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2008); Elias al-Maqdisi and Sam Solomon, *Al-Yahud, Eternal Islamic Enmity and the Jews* (Charlottesville: ANM Publishers, 2010); Mark A. Gabriel, *Islam and the Jews: The Unfinished Battle* (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2003).



Jordanian MP Muhammad Zahrawi (above): “The plundering Jews, the slayers of prophets.” Jordanian parliament members invoked the Qur’an a number of times in anti-semitic statements.

until the Day of Judgement unless they repent and return to the path.⁸

Antisemitism during the 2021 Gaza War

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that Arab and Muslim anti-Israel utterances during the May 2021 Gaza war made extensive use of quotes from the Qur’an and the Sunna, starkly demonstrating the enduring power of Islam’s canonical texts to shape hostile Muslim attitudes towards Jews.

Take, for example, the gloating by an Egyptian scholar that “the faces of the Jews will be disfigured from what the Muslims will do to them”—a reference to Sura 4:47: “You who have been given the Book! Believe in what we have sent down ... before

⁸ Yahiya Emerick, *What Islam Is All About* (Long Island: International Books and Tapes Supply, 1997), p. 211.

we obliterate faces.”⁹ Or the assertion by the mother of a prominent slain Hamas terrorist that “the Jews slayed the prophets of Allah with one hand, and they distorted their sacred books with their other hand.”¹⁰ Known as *tahrif*, the claim that the Jews corrupted their scriptures is based on several Qur’anic passages, notably Sura 2:75: “A group of them has already heard the word of God, [and] then altered it after they had understood it—and they know [they have done this].”¹¹ And a Canadian imam claimed that “animosity of the believers towards the Jew is based on religious grounds,” invoking Qur’anic verses (e.g., Suras 2:27, 5:64, 2:61) to argue that the Jews disbelieve in God, reject and deny the prophets, and act unjustly.¹²

The most striking manifestation of antisemitism occurred in a special session of the Jordanian parliament—a country at peace with Israel since 1994—where members of parliament (MPs) invoked the Qur’an and the life of Muhammad and were proud to do so. Thus, for example, one member called for the abolition of all agreements with Israel

because the Jews are the slayers of prophets, who have betrayed all the pacts and contracts. From the beginning of time they had

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no respect for treaties. They violated their pact with the Prophet Muhammad, so why do we expect them to abide by their promises? All our agreements with them should be annulled.¹³

What is the basis for these claims? The libel that Jews are the “slayers of prophets” comes straight from the Qur’an where it is made repeatedly (e.g., Sura 2:61: “They disbelieved in the signs of Allah, and killed the prophets without any right”).¹⁴ Likewise, the claim that Jews are treacherous pact-breakers echoes the Qur’anic stipulation that “for their breaking their covenant, We cursed them ... You will continue to see treachery from them.”¹⁵

Following in his colleague’s footsteps, another Jordanian MP added that the Jews are cursed by God and claimed that Jews fear the Palestinians more than they fear God. It is a Qur’anic claim that “infidels” fear other things more than God while Muslims are said to fear God so that they go forth willingly and bravely to fight with no fear of death (Sura 2:243-4).¹⁶

Yet another MP denounced the “criminal Zionists, the sons of apes and pigs,” invoking the Qur’anic claim (Sura 5:59-60) that God changed some Jews into apes and pigs. He

⁹ “Egyptian Islamic Scholar Hazem Shouman: Allah Promised The Total Destruction Of The Jews,” The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Washington, D.C., May 25, 2021.

¹⁰ “Mother Of Al-Qassam Brigades Commander Mus’ab Hajjaj, Killed In Recent Fighting,” MEMRI, May 27, 2021.

¹¹ See, also, Suras 2:79, 3:78, 5:13, 6:91.

¹² “Canadian Imam Younus Kathrada: Muslim Enmity Toward The Jews Is Just And Logical,” MEMRI, May 27, 2021.

¹³ “Jordanian Parliament Session on Israel-Hamas Fighting,” MEMRI, May 17, 2021.

¹⁴ See, also, Suras 2:87, 2:91, 3:21, 3:112, 3:181, 3:183, 4:155, 5:70; Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Qur’an and the Theme of Jews as ‘Killers of the Prophets,’” *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur’an and Hadith Studies* (Kuala Lumpur), 2 (2012), pp. 9-32.

¹⁵ Sura 5:13; see, also, Suras 2:27, 4:155.

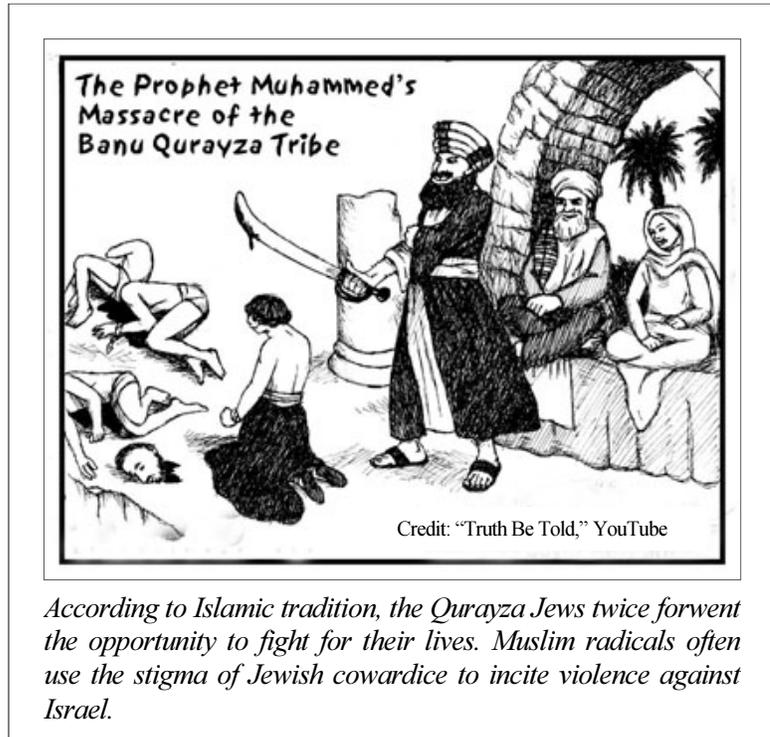
¹⁶ “Jordanian Parliament Session on Israel-Hamas Fighting.”

also echoed the claim that the Jews are under God's curse since they "do not abide any agreement, contract, or pact ... Our conflict is of a historical, religious nature."¹⁷

Another participant called Jews "lowlifes who violated their pact with the Prophet Muhammad."¹⁸ This was an ominously genocidal allusion as the numerous mentions by Jordanian MPs of Jewish treachery related to the Battle of the Ditch and the ensuing extermination of the Medina Jewish tribe of Qurayza by the triumphant Muslims.

According to Islamic sources, the tribe had incited the Meccans to take up arms against Muhammad, only to deny them support when they besieged Medina. When the Meccans withdrew in disarray, Muhammad, directed by an angel, ordered his forces to attack the Jewish tribe, beheading the men after they had surrendered unconditionally and enslaving the women and children.

Islamic tradition considers the Qurayza genocide totally justified with multiple Qur'anic verses labelling the Jews as cowardly and treacherous, laying the groundwork for their millenarian stigmatization as a cowardly and treacherous lot. In reality, Muhammad had urged his followers to "kill any Jew who comes into your power" and had been forcibly expelling the Jewish tribes from Medina well before the Battle of the Ditch with Muslims taking over their properties.¹⁹ Therefore, the Qurayza genocide was the last act of



destroying the longstanding Jewish presence in Medina rather than its trigger.

Preventing Peace

Some Islamic antisemitic stereotypes seem custom-designed to prevent peace. The disparagement of Jews as treacherous pact-breakers is a clear disincentive to entering into treaties with Israel. This is further reinforced by Sura 8:58, which instructs Muslims to break preemptively a treaty if they fear treachery, thus providing a theological mandate to Muslim treachery so long as it is deemed preemptive. The Qur'an also claims that Jews are warmongering sources of "corruption" on earth (Sura 5:64), with the "warmongering" libel diffused over time well beyond its Islamic origin so that it is often levelled against Israel throughout the West.

Another Qur'anic assertion hostile to peace is the claim that Jews have an

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 369.

inordinate lust for life. Sura 2:96 states that Jews are the “most desirous of people for life,” hence are unwilling to kill and be killed in warfare. This is allegedly validated by the Islamic version of the Battle of the Ditch, when, on the path to obliteration, the Qurayza Jews twice forwent the opportunity to fight for their lives. The stigma of Jewish cowardice has been reinforced many times by Muslim radicals to incite violence against Israel. Victory, it is claimed, lies just around the corner because the Jews will not fight. This depiction of the Jew who “loves life more than death” has given rise to delusional expectations that Israelis will not fight well with the attendant repeated Arab military defeats and prolonged suffering.

To look at the Jews through the frame of the Qur’an is to see them as contemptible, weak, cowardly-yet-warmongering, treacherous losers. This stereotype offers a very poor basis indeed for Muslims to engage in a lasting quest for peace with the Jewish state.

Whitewashing Islamic Antisemitism

The silence and denial surrounding this phenomenon is as striking as Islamic religious antisemitism itself. Despite the repeated exposure of its principles by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, the origins, structure and impact of Islamic antisemitism do not receive the attention they deserve.

As an example of silencing, Kenneth Timmerman wrote that as a daily reader of the U.S. government’s Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) from the Middle East in the years 1985-94, he could not recall a single instance where antisemitic hate

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speech was translated.²⁰

Why the silence and denial? According to Timmerman, FBIS’s omission of antisemitic texts was probably designed to avoid giving a negative impression of Wash-

ington’s Middle East allies to Congress and the American public. But there are other, deeper, factors that contribute to the deafening silence regarding Islamic antisemitism:

- *Too intractable?* Exposing the religious basis of this hatred could make it seem too deeply rooted and intractable. Denying the religious foundation allows for greater optimism about interfaith coexistence. This is part of a broader problem with other aspects of Islamic teachings, such as the doctrine of jihad.
- *Enduring myths.* Evidence and discussion of Islamic antisemitism could undermine the Islamic “golden age” myth of a harmonious coexistence among Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Muslim rule.²¹ It also runs against the narrative of unblemished Palestinian victimhood.
- *Ignoring Islam’s unsavory features.* A longstanding Christian view of Islam, dating back almost to its beginning and held by such luminaries as John of Damascus and Nicolas of Cusa, has been to regard it as some kind of Christian

²⁰ Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Preachers of Hate: Islam and the War on America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2004), p. 63.

²¹ For a rebuttal of this myth, see, Darío Fernández-Morera, *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise: Muslims, Christians, and Jews under Islamic Rule in Medieval Spain* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2016).

heresy. This has motivated some Christians to adopt the mission of affirming what they see as good and true in Islam by discerning and retrieving Biblical faith from that faith's foundations. Influential exponents of this approach have included the Catholic cleric Louis Massignon and the Anglican clerics William Montgomery Watt and Bishop Kenneth Cragg.²² One cost of adopting a personal mission to promote positive regard for Islam is that it disables objective analysis, establishing an environment that makes it much more difficult to expose and discuss less palatable aspects of the faith.

- *Dhimmitude as a catalyst of anti-semitism.* Middle Eastern Christian pre-Islamic antisemitism was later reinforced by the conditions of the *dhimmi* (protection to religious minorities who submit to Muslim rule), which created a precarious environment that encouraged Christians to embrace and perpetuate antisemitic attitudes as a survival strategy. One of the *dhimma*'s requirements is that the conquered peoples should feel grateful to Islam and not criticize it but render faithful service to it. Thus, for example, Bat Ye'or points out that the first published Arabic translation of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was done by Catholic Christians in Jerusalem in 1926, after a period of great insecurity for Christians in the Levant, including the World War I Armenian and Assyrian genocides.²³



The requirement that conquered peoples feel grateful to Islam reinforces Middle Eastern Christian antisemitism. Examples include Coptic popes denouncing Israel as when Pope Shenouda III (above) opposed normalization following the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty.

Other examples are the periodic statements by Coptic popes denouncing Israel. Pope Shenouda III opposed normalization of relations between Israel and Egypt after the signing of the 1979 peace treaty and banned pilgrimage by Coptic Christians to the Holy Land, saying, "I will never go to Jerusalem except hand-in-hand with my Muslim brothers after the end of the Israeli occupation."²⁴

Conclusion

Since Muslim hopes to annihilate Israel are constantly nourished by the Qur'an's and Sunna's anti-Jewish libels, an enduring peace can only come when Muslims no longer cherish dreams of victory on the foundation of such libels. For this to happen, they must find a way to reject or at least compartmentalize the antisemitism of these religious texts—an undeniably difficult task since

²² On Cragg, see Christopher Lamb, *The Call to Retrieval* (London: Grey Seal Books, 1997).

²³ Bat Ye'or, *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), p. 169.

²⁴ *Al-Arabiya* (Dubai), Apr. 17, 2018.

antipathy to the “treacherous Jew” is such a prominent part of Islam’s origin story. A step in the right direction would be to interpret the antisemitic current in Islam’s sacred scriptures as only applicable to Muhammad’s time, and not to conflate the Jews of Israel with the long-dead seventh-century Arabian Jewish tribes.

Indeed, a growing number of Muslim states are showing a willingness to overcome this theological legacy by normalizing relations with Israel. This is a positive and welcome development that reflects the victory of common sense over dogma and fantastic dreams of victory.

But, for lasting peace to be achieved, more Muslims need to follow. As long as the core texts of Islam endure, the rich vein of anti-Jewish statements in the Qur’an and the Sunna has the potential to keep reigniting anti-Jewish hatred.

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