

Muslim Anti-Semitism and Zionist Orientalism: The Workings of a Vicious Cycle

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Oct. 3, 2003; 3:15 pm

“On Formation and Renewal”

Notre Dame

If you listen to non-Jewish, non-Arab, non-Muslim Americans talking about “the Arab-Israeli conflict,” you’re apt to get the impression that the conflict is something unique to *that* region and *its* culture, so that however tragic it is, it’s both foreign and irrelevant to *us*. Listen, however, to politically-active Arabs, Muslims, and Jews in this country and you hear something else entirely. Listen long enough, and the violence of what they say about each other convinces you that the Arab-Israeli conflict is not a faraway phenomenon taking place somewhere else, but a rhetorical *dans macabre* taking place right here.

In this paper, I discuss the scholarly and journalistic (but mostly journalistic) war of words that has given this conflict articulate expression in the past few years, with special emphasis on the past two or three years. What we find on both sides, I argue, is a rhetoric of blackmail and recrimination that functions to block each sides’ recognition of the legitimate claims of the other. I end with some brief comments about the psychopolitical mechanism behind the rhetoric, and offer some modest prescriptions for dealing with it.

Muslim Anti-Semitism

In recent writing by American Jews of Zionist sympathies—from as far to the left as *Tikkun* and as far to the right as *Commentary*—one finds Jews gesturing with increasing alarm at the rise of a “new anti-Semitism” of specifically Arab/Muslim provenance, with

some going so far as to speak of the possibility of a “Second Holocaust” of Arab/Muslim authorship.¹ Some Jews have taken sharp exception to such claims,² and most Arabs/Muslims have taken offense at it, but there is no denying its currency in Jewish discourse, particularly in the US. One finds versions of it in scholarship, in journalism, on university campuses, in synagogues, among civic leaders, and all over the Internet. It is, in short, a subject of deep consternation, anger, and fear, bordering at times on panic.

A large and proliferating literature, both scholarly and journalistic, has grown up around this topic, much of it deriving from Bernard Lewis’s 1986 book, *Semites and Anti-Semites*.³ The literature ranges over many complex topics, and subsumes a great many claims, but for our purposes, we can narrow its salient claims to three. The first is that there *is* such a thing as a distinctively Muslim variety of anti-Semitism, not strictly

¹ Actually, the phrase “the new anti-Semitism” is somewhat confusing, as the recent literature on anti-Semitism makes reference to several distinct but occasionally overlapping “new anti-Semitisms,” and goes back at least to 1974. More recently, there is, first, the “new anti-Semitism” alleged against elements of the Catholic Right in the late 1980s and early 1990s; on this, see Buckley (1992). There is secondly the “new anti-Semitism” alleged against elements of the African-American and Black Muslim communities; for discussion, see West (1992), Puddington (1994), Moravchik (1995), Rubin (1995), and Rieder (1995). Finally, there is the Arab/Muslim anti-Semitism discussed in the text, and described as “the new anti-Semitism” in ch. 9 of Lewis (1986). For further references, see note 3 below.

² The best-known piece is Wieseltier (2002). See Slater (2001) and (2002), Kovel (2002), Avnery (2002), and Klein (2002). For a similar argument by a non-Jewish author, see Judt (2002).

³ Lewis (1986/1999). Lewis’s book is one of the earliest contributions, but Lewis himself refers to an earlier literature, p. 266n.4. See also the third part of Wistrich (1991) and Cohn-Sherbok (2002), chs. 17, 21. For an interesting novelistic exploration of the subject, see Roth (1993).

The more recent literature is vast. Among the main contributions are Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith (undated); Kramer (1994) and (1995); Pipes (1999); Karsh (2000); Ye’or (2001); Nirenstein (2001); Donadio (2001); Rosen (2001); Sullivan (2001); Halkin (2002); Berman (2002); Rosenbaum (2002a) and (2002b); Wistrich (2002); Schoenfeld (2002); Gurfinkiel (2002); Wisse (2002a), (2002b), and (2003); Ozick (2002) and (2003); Webster (2002); Lerner (2003); and Gerstenfeld (2003).

speaking an authentic part of the religion, but a perversion or misunderstanding of it.⁴ The second is that Muslim anti-Semitism has come to acquire worldwide scope, having begun life in a small corner of the Arab world, having spread from there to the non-Arab Muslim world, and having circled back to the West in the past few decades via immigration. The third is that the problem of Muslim anti-Semitism is now a severe one, with a status somewhere between the France of the Dreyfus affair and the Germany of *Kristallnacht*—closer to the latter than the former, and moving unmistakably in the Nazi direction.⁵ The literature in question varies a great deal in quality, but if we winnow the wheat from the chaff, there is, I think, little reasonable room for doubt that the first two claims have been amply borne out, and that a defeasible presumption has been established in favor of the third. Reasonable people may reasonably disagree about the severity of Muslim anti-Semitism, but given the nature and abundance of the evidence, no one can reasonably deny that a widespread problem exists.

But many Arab/Muslim intellectuals—and their sympathizers on the left—deny just this. On their view, the Western obsession with anti-Semitism is both a double-standard and a ploy, intended to create sympathy for Israel by “playing the Holocaust card,” and intended by the same method to divert attention from Israeli/Zionist sins. The “new anti-Semitism,” one reads in this literature, is nothing but a “sales pitch,” a “blank check”—in short, a hysterical expression of “the Holocaust industry” on behalf of that

⁴ For views that take anti-Semitism to be more central to Islamic theology, see Nettler (1998) and Ye’or (2001).

⁵ Cf. Lewis (1986), p. 256.

“shitty little country, Israel.”⁶ (The pecuniary metaphors are worth noting.) Perhaps the most prominent and authoritative expression of this view comes from the Palestinian-American academic Edward Said. In a 1986 review of the Bernard Lewis book mentioned earlier, Said writes:

Bernard Lewis is a British Orientalist now living in the United States where he has become a prolific neoconservative Cold War polemicist whose hostile attention is focused on the Arabs and Islam. He has now patched together a disorganized and tendentious book out of articles that have appeared elsewhere....The extraordinary thing about this effort is how little evidence Lewis’s allegations actually dredge up....That there is anti-Semitism in the Arab world and elsewhere is a fact: a sorry, appalling ugly, and inexcusable fact...although Lewis is too shoddy a historian ever to do more than allude and insinuate....This is natural enough in the work of a journalist who has made a recent name for himself as a political enemy of the Arabs and Islam. It is worse in the work of a historian who simply suppresses the second context of his work—that is, the full contemporary history of the Middle East....What *Semites and Anti-Semites* adds up to is not so much history as sleazy propaganda in the age of Reagan and Begin.⁷

That Lewis is a prolific scholar is true enough; that he is a neo-conservative is neither obvious nor relevant. That his book is “tendentious or disorganized” is false, and as for the accusation of insufficient evidence, besides being false, it would be more impressive

⁶ The phrase “sales pitch” is from Cook (2002), “blank check” from Karimi (2003), “Holocaust Industry” from Finkelstein (2001b), and “shitty little country” from BBC News (2001). See also Abdel-Latif (2002a) and (2002b). Similar in tone is the cover of the *New Statesman* (London), for March 18, 2002, which depicts a yellow Star of David piercing the Union Jack, and asks, “A Kosher Conspiracy?” For a more sophisticated treatment of the issues, see Massad (2000).

It’s worth noting that some Arabs and Muslims have begun to take issue with such views. See Rushdie (2001); El-Baz (2003); Sid-Ahmed (2002); Husain (2002) and (2003); Algazy (2002); Saleh (2002); Yahya (2002).

⁷ Said (1994), ch. 32, *passim*. For a similar approach to Lewis’s work, see Said (1978), p. 317. A *reductio ad absurdum* of Said’s view is achieved, *faute de mieux*, in Tamimi (2002), which admits the existence of Muslim anti-Semitism—but only if “full” moral responsibility for its existence can be transferred to “the Zionist project” (p. 128). One oddity of this paper is that having announced the intention to discuss “Muslim attitudes toward Jews,” the author spends more time “contextualizing” that topic by discussing the evils of Zionism than he ever spends on the paper’s supposed topic.

if Said had actually dealt with any of the evidence presented in the book, which he doesn't. Forced to say *something* about that evidence, we find Said conceding, grudgingly, that there "is anti-Semitism in the Arab world"—only to undermine it in the next breath with the phrase "and elsewhere," and then a few years later to make an unexplained about-face on the matter.⁸ The further assertion that Lewis is an "enemy of the Arabs and Islam" is a textbook-case of the fallacy of poisoning the well; it also happens to be false. That Lewis "suppresses the second context of his work" commits the *tu quoque* fallacy while artfully begging the question. In short, what we see here is less a book review than the rubric of one put to the purposes of literary blackmail: dare to discuss Muslim anti-Semitism in a sustained way, the threat goes, and you'll be branded an enemy of the Arabs and Islam, and a lackey for the Right.

If this is the *modus operandi* of much of the Arab/Muslim intelligentsia (and it is), the *modus operandi* at "street level" frequently amplifies its worst features. At this latter level, one hears not the smoothly-refined venom of scholarly polemic, but open Holocaust denial, explicit sympathy for suicide bombings, and furtive interest in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁹ In pointing this out, I don't mean to lay responsibility for the latter sins at the door of anyone but their practitioners. But neither can one dismiss the connection, however indirect, between the one discourse and the other. It is no exaggeration to say that there is, thanks to rhetoric like Said's, little room for frank discussion of Muslim anti-Semitism among Arabs and Muslims. The absence of

⁸ Said (1998).

⁹ On Holocaust denial, see Agbarieh (2001). On sympathy for suicide bombing, see Palmer (2003). On the *Protocols*, see Pipes (2002), Clark (2002), Khawaja (2002), and Eskanazi (2003).

discursive room at the “high” end inevitably facilitates anti-Semitism at the “low” end, and evasions like Said’s give the guilty just the refuge they want.

Zionist Orientalism

As we’ve seen, Arab/Muslim writers frequently argue that the charge of Muslim anti-Semitism is a convenient ideological device—a “blank check”—designed to divert attention from the sins of Zionism or of Israel. Regarded as a response to the accusation of Muslim anti-Semitism, the claim is fallacious. But a claim can be fallaciously-advanced while still containing a kernel of truth; a fallacious argument may not *make* a good point, but it may *have* one. Having rejected the dialectical strategy of those who deny or minimize Muslim anti-Semitism, we need to look carefully at their counter-accusation, considering it as an independent hypothesis.

The accusation, to spell it out, goes something like this. The term “anti-Semitism” is notoriously vague. Because “Semite” doesn’t refer either to a race or a religion (or anything else), “anti-Semite” ends up referring to a rather elusive neurosis that fixates on the *imagined* characteristics of “the Jews.” Since the characteristics *are* imagined, accusations of anti-Semitism are somewhat flexible—sufficiently flexible to be used to discredit criticism of Zionism or of Israel on the grounds that to be “against” these things is *ipso facto* to be against “the Jews.” By this expedient, anti-Zionism is habitually equated with anti-Semitism, and the steadfast defense of Arab rights is routinely associated with terrorism. Given the moral resonance of “anti-Semitism,” “Hitler,” and “the Holocaust” in the West, given Western guilt over its own anti-Semitism, and given the West’s relative indifference or hostility to Arab/Muslim rights, non-Jews have little

incentive to resist the blackmail involved in such accusations, typically succumbing to it at little cost to them, but at significant cost to Arabs and Muslims.

As the term is currently used in post-colonial and area studies, “Orientalism” is an academic neologism coined to denote the distinctive form of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry endemic to the West. This controversial and revisionist coinage comes from Edward Said’s 1978 book, *Orientalism*, which describes Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient,” and “a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness and later, Western empire.”¹⁰ For our purposes, we can narrow Said’s thesis to three claims: that there *is* such a phenomenon as Orientalism; that it’s morally reprehensible; and that it has been expressed with reprehensible consequences in the history of Western imperialism.

“Zionism” names the Jewish aspiration for a national homeland—a Jewish State—in historic Palestine, as a refuge against the depredations of anti-Semitism, and a place where distinctively Jewish ideals might flourish. The Zionist ideal is perhaps best captured in a slogan of Israel Zangwill, an early Zionist, who described Palestine as “a land without a people for a people without a land.” The idea is that the Jews were a “people without a land” in the sense of being a minority wherever they lived, hence vulnerable to persecution. Palestine, in turn, was a “land without a people” in the sense of being a barren land without significant population, hence open to redemption by Jewish settlement and labor. Zionism, then, aimed to secure Jewish ownership of and sovereignty over Palestine, thereby saving the Jews from destruction, and facilitating

¹⁰ Said (1978), pp. 3 and 202-3. For recent versions of Said’s thesis by like-minded scholars, see Kabbani (1986), Alam (2002), and Little (2003).

their return to their ancestral homeland. The consummation of this wish was the establishment in May 1948 of the State of Israel.

The crucial claim at the center of Said's work is that for all of its redemptive power in Western eyes, Zionism was in fact a form of Orientalism—that is, an ideology of conquest and dispossession. For contrary to Zionist convictions, Palestine was not a “land without a people,” but a land with one—namely the Palestinians, who outnumbered and out-owned the Zionist settlers until the very eve of Israel's creation. Given this, the project of creating a specifically Jewish state in (or throughout) Palestine was bound to lead to the dispossession or even destruction of the Palestinians, a fact that indicts Zionism of a grave injustice. On this view, the relationship between Orientalism, the Zionists and the Palestinians is analogous to that between Manifest Destiny, the American settlers, and the destruction of the Native Americans. In both cases, a messianic religious vision derived from the Old Testament justified the conquest and dispossession of an indigenous ethnic group, relegating them to the status of second-class citizens, refugees, and in the worst case, death. And in both cases, the conquerors engaged in conquest while cynically playing the role of victims: in the American case by exploiting the “Buffalo Bill” mythology; in the Zionist case by “playing the Holocaust card.”¹¹ The complex interaction of Zionism and Orientalism in this thesis is what I'm calling *Zionist Orientalism*.

¹¹ For short statements of the anti-Zionist case, see Hourani (1984 [1967]) and Hitchens (2002). For longer treatments, see Antonius, (2000 [1938]); Chomsky (1974); Abu-Lughod (1971); Said (1980); Lilienthal (1984); Said and Hitchens (1988); Hadawy (1990); Masalha (1992), (1997), and (2000); and Finkelstein (2001a). For an extended discussion of the Native American/Palestinian analogy, see Finkelstein (1995) and (2001a), ch. 4.

The Zionist Orientalist thesis involves a complex and controversial set of claims, almost every one of which may legitimately be disputed. Precisely because it is complex, however, and difficult to dispute in a soundbite culture, defenders of Israel have often (in fact, typically) taken the path of least resistance in dealing with it, making reflexive charges of “anti-Semitism” against its proponents in lieu of dealing with their arguments. We see a succinct example of this in a recent essay by the Israeli writer Hillel Halkin:

One cannot be against Israel or Zionism, as opposed to this or that Israeli policy or Zionist position, without being anti-Semitic. Israel is the state of the Jews. Zionism is the belief that the Jews should have a state. To defame Israel is to defame the Jews. To wish it never existed, or would cease to exist, is to wish to destroy the Jews.¹²

Despite its syllogism-like appearance, Halkin’s argument is little more than an exercise in obfuscation. First, Zionism is not merely “the belief that the Jews should have a state”; it is the belief that the Jews should have had a *Jewish* state in a place where the majority population was not Jewish—a difficulty Halkin neither addresses nor even acknowledges. Secondly, to reject Zionism is not to “defame” anyone or anything; it is to reject its principles, something that can surely come from a well-intentioned commitment to incompatible principles. (Nor in any case is “Israel” to be so blithely equated with “the Jews.”) Thirdly, “to wish Israel never to have existed” is not “to wish to destroy the Jews” so long as one thinks that there were other viable options for saving them. And it’s an open question whether there were. Finally, “to wish that Israel cease to exist” is ambiguous. In its non-malevolent sense, it refers not to a wish to harm Jews, but to a

¹² Halkin (2002), p. 31. For similar views, see Wertheimer (1995), Rubin (1995), Ross and Schneider (1995), and Cohn-Sherbok (2002). Wisse (1992) and Ye’or (2001) are particularly crude and offensive examples of the tendency; Lewis (1986) is a refreshing exception to it. Hertzberg (1995) is a disappointingly weak discussion of the issue.

wish to do away with the specifically Jewish character of the Israeli legal system so as to promote a secular as opposed to sectarian conception of citizenship. In short, whatever the merits or demerits of the anti-Zionist position, no argument like Halkin's counts as a legitimate response to it. The deficiencies of the argument, however, have done nothing to weaken its currency, and one regularly finds pro-Israeli polemicists using it in brazen attempts at insult and defamation.

As with the Arab/Muslim case, the "highbrow" Zionist literature finds its debased counterpart at the middle- and low-brow levels, where we find habitual comparisons of Arabs and Muslims to predatory and scavenging animals, wild rumor and innuendo about Arab/Muslim treachery, and casual proposals made for the forcible expulsion and even extermination of the Palestinians.¹³ Here, too, the connection between "high-brow" and "low-brow" is attenuated but real, as is the need for the corresponding moral judgment.

The Workings of the Vicious Cycle: Diagnosis by Mill, Prescription by Sartre.

So: On the one hand, we have the very real and menacing phenomenon of Muslim anti-Semitism, discussed principally by the Jews targeted by it, but ignored or even brusquely dismissed as a Zionist ploy by the wider Arab/Muslim community. On the other hand, we have the equally real and dehumanizing phenomenon of Orientalism, discussed principally by Arabs and Muslims, but contemptuously dismissed as a fig-leaf for anti-Semitism by pro-Israeli Jews. Each side stands indicted by the other, and each side uses its indictment—fallaciously—to discredit the claims of the other. Further, each side has a

¹³ On animal metaphors, see Fallaci (2002); see also Khawaja-Decter (2001). On rumor and innuendo, see Khawaja (2002) and (2003), and Fine and Khawaja (2003). On expulsion, see Hamzeh (2003), Tristram (2003), Abunimah, Parry and King-Irani (2002), and Abunimah (2003). On extermination, see Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee (2003).

powerful investment in the evasion of facts identified by the other side. And each resists, with furious vehemence, the attempt to integrate both sets of facts into a single coherent account. Finally, each side uses supercharged moral rhetoric to discredit and disarm opponents, while seeking to coerce the assent of the as-yet uncommitted.

The key to understanding the vicious cycle at work here, I think, is to see that the mechanism behind it is each side's fear of discovering that its most cherished beliefs might be "stained in sin." What Arabs and Muslims fear is the discovery that anti-Semitism might really turn out to be an intrinsic feature of Islamic theology rather than a Christian import. What Zionists fear is the discovery that Zionism might really be an ideology of conquest and dispossession on par with Manifest Destiny—that the Palestinians are, to put it somewhat perversely, the Cherokees of Israel (perverse because the Cherokees were thought by the American settlers to be one of the lost tribes of Israel!). The fear in both cases speaks to deep questions of identity. Arabs and Muslims, even relatively secular ones, have for decades invested their moral identities in mythologies about the "glories of Islam." And Jews, even apolitical non-Israelis, have equally invested themselves in mythologies about Zionism and Israel. Each side sees the very thought of public discussion of its "sore points" as an existential threat to identity. The result is a discourse structured by evasion and fear, compensated for by blackmail and recrimination.

If I'm right about this, the key to breaking the cycle may well be to press each issue against the side that least wants to deal with it, demanding that each side cease its evasions of fundamental issues. My own proposal for doing so would be to revive the project inaugurated a few decades ago by Jean-Paul Sartre in his journal *Les Temps*

Moderne, which consisted of a series of intense and sustained dialogues (991 pages!) between Arabs and Israelis on the issues that divided them, with a view toward mutual respect and understanding. Sartre's version of the project was a mixed success at best. It was, as I.F. Stone put it, less a "dialogue" than a "dual monologue": "The two sets of contributors sit not just in separate rooms, like employers and strikers in a bitter labor dispute, but in separate universes where the simplest fact turns out to have diametrically opposed meanings."¹⁴

I suspect this result arose in part through Sartre's failure to adjudicate more actively between the disputants, and relatedly, by the inadequacy of the normative framework at his disposal for doing so. The "simplest fact" has diametrically opposed meanings to those with different and often distorted background beliefs of the sort we've been considering here; the same fact comes more readily into focus if one views it against a less distorted background. Any future version of the Sartrean project would have to take a more activist approach to adjudicating between the two sides, pressing the issue of anti-Semitism against critics of Israel, and that of Orientalism against its defenders. It would also have to involve a more robust set of background beliefs than one finds in, say, Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* or *Anti-Semite and Jew*. My own preference is for a virtue ethics drawn from Aristotle, a politics drawn from Locke, and an ethics of discourse and inquiry drawn from Mill, but that's a large topic that I'll have to leave for another time.

In the meantime, I think we all know enough to say, with Mill, that the gravest of injustices in discourse "is to argue sophistically, to suppress facts or arguments, to

¹⁴ See Stone (1984 [1967]).

misstate elements of the case, or misrepresent the opposite opinion.”¹⁵ Grand Sartrean projects aside, the modest task of reform and renewal can begin with the simpler one of passing appropriate judgment on such violations of the ethics of discourse as we find in our midst, and refusing to succumb to the blackmail intended for us by the parties to the dispute, here and abroad. Nor will opportunities be scarce: the electoral season will bring politicians falling over themselves to prove their pro-Israeli *bona fides*, while the academic year brings students, faculty, and activists falling over themselves to do the reverse. To the extent that this discourse will be structured by the dynamic I’ve described here, those outside of the dynamic have the responsibility of “shutting it down” by starving it of the sort of attention or approval that it seeks. Such modest counter-gestures may not do much to bring peace to the Middle East, but they are a beginning. And better a beginning, however modest, than an ending.

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