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Review

# Arabs and the Holocaust

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**The Palestinian Tragedy, a late product of 19th-20th century colonialism and imperialism in general, must also be understood as a very specific aftershock of the greatest industrial genocide in history, the Nazi holocaust, which shook the ways in which we view human society and history.**

Technological advance may be inevitable in an industrial age, but can be accompanied by and actually facilitate the most horrific social retrogression – in our age, not only genocide but also nuclear war and catastrophic environmental degradation.

“In Auschwitz,” writes the Italian Marxist Enzo Traverso, “(w)e also see a pre-eminently modern genocide (which) requires us to rethink the twentieth century and the very foundations of our civilization.” The genocide, in which the Jews of Europe were the central (though not the exclusive) target, also poses a challenge to any theory that sees an inevitable tendency toward human progress, including Marxism:

“The incapacity of Marxism – the most powerful and vigorous body of emancipatory thinking of the modern age – first to see, then to understand the Jewish genocide raises a major doubt about the relevance of its answers to the challenges of the twentieth century. Marxists’ silence [at the time of the events]...suggests limits to their interpretations of the past, barbarous century.”

Is it possible to simultaneously confront the global significance and intensely local consequences of the holocaust? And if its horrors are supposed to provide lasting lessons for our present and future, what then about the never-ending debate about the “uniqueness” of the Nazi holocaust?

Traverso concludes that “(a)cknowledging Auschwitz’s historical uniqueness can have a meaning only if it helps to promote a fruitful dialogue between the meaning of the past and the uniqueness of the present. The goal must be to illuminate the many threads that bind our world to the very recent world in which this crime was born.” (Enzo Traverso, *Understanding the Nazi Genocide. Marxism After Auschwitz*, Pluto Press and International Institute for Research and Education, 1999: 4, 78, emphasis added)

Among other threads, without the Nazi holocaust in Europe there would certainly be millions more Jews alive today, including in the Middle East – Iraq, Morocco and Egypt especially – but probably fewer Zionists, and almost certainly not a “Jewish state.” The intervention of catastrophes in history is far from entirely predictable, and its consequences even less so

The Lebanese Marxist Gilbert Achcar took up the challenge to illuminate, or untangle, some of these threads, in particular “the reception of the Holocaust in the Middle East,” when Traverso asked him to contribute a chapter for an Italian anthology on the Shoah (the Jewish catastrophe in Europe). This exploration would lead to Achcar’s full-length book *The Arabs and the Holocaust*.

## Multiple Diversities

As Achcar states from the outset, it requires “enormous effort to depict the reception of the Holocaust in the Arab

world, where the diversities of countries and conditions is multiplied many times over by the diversity of political tendencies and sensibilities, even as the inhabitants' views of the Jewish tragedy are rendered infinitely more complex by their relationship to the Palestinian tragedy, the Nakba." (2)

How then to untangle the threads? In Part I, "The Time of the Shoah," Achcar dissects the four main strands of Arab political thought from the early 1930s to the eve of the 1948 war: "Liberal Westernizers," "Marxists," "Nationalists" and "Reactionary and/or Fundamentalist Pan-Islamists."

These four chapters make an extraordinary contribution, especially for those of us who can't read Arabic texts. It's essential to cut through the stereotype that politics in the Arab world was monolithic, aligned with Nazism and fanatically hostile to Jews.

The identity "Arab Nationalism = Hatred of Jews" has been burned into mass consciousness by much of the western mass media, but perhaps most of all through Leon Uris's fantastically successful 1958 propaganda novel *Exodus* and the Hollywood blockbuster it spawned.

Gilbert Achcar pulls no punches in his own critique of elements of Arab nationalism, but also guides the reader through the complexities of the picture. Discussing the issues of alleged and real "Arab Nationalism and Anti-Semitism," he cites "the anti-Semitic tendencies of certain Iraqi nationalists (who) simply accused Jews of supporting Zionism or the British [the colonial overlord of interwar Iraq] despite the fact that many Iraqi Jews were anti-Zionists." Indeed, "the Jews who were both anti-British and anti-Zionist were usually Communists."

In 1930s Palestine, on the other hand, "Palestinian nationalists' failure to distinguish between Jews and Zionists was generally much more 'natural' than the Iraqis', inasmuch as the Palestinian Arabs were confronted with a Yishuv [Jewish immigration to Palestine] that defined itself as representative of world Jewry and included only a tiny minority of anti-Zionist Jews." But despite this, "the most radical representative of secular Arab nationalism in Palestine, the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, had so enlightened an attitude toward the Jews that Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, in their book *The Palestinian People*, single it out for praise." (94)

Kimmerling and Migdal explained that Istiqlal "was forthright in proclaiming that the British, not the Jews, should be the primary targets of action" in some cases, Palestinians even organized contingents of guards to protect Jews and their property during demonstrations." (*The Palestinian People: A History*, Harvard University Press, 2003: 106. Cited by Achcar, 94, 316n)

The fundamental point of these examples and many others is that anti-Jewish attitudes were hardly the driving force or independent variable in Arab nationalism. Rather, strategies for the struggle against colonialism, the conflicted role of religion, and methods of political organization were the dominant questions.

Sectors of Arab nationalism certainly had some affinities with fascist organization and even more so did the rightist Union of Revisionist Zionists, "some of whose most prominent members would scale the summits of the Israeli state" (Achcar, 65) as leaders of the Herut and later Likud parties but few had much of anything in common with the genocidal racist ideology of the Nazi cult.

Achcar is nonetheless scathing in his denunciation of the sterile and reactionary concept "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," which drew elements of the Arab leadership toward alliances with fascist regimes that were enemies of Britain in particular.

# The Real Amin al-Husseini

In the discussion of “Reactionary and/or Fundamentalist Pan-Islamists,” the figure of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Mohammad Amin al-Husseini, inevitably stands out. For those of roughly my generation who were introduced to “Haj Amin” through reading Exodus, the Grand Mufti stands out as the ultimate villain, the ally if not agent of the Nazis and the aspiring Arab Hitler. Achcar identifies him as an “architect of the Nakba,” the 1947-’49 Palestinian Catastrophe.

Husseini was installed at age 26 in 1921 as Mufti by the British High Commissioner for Palestine Herbert Samuel “a Zionist “who had been one of the architects of the 1917 Balfour Declaration.” By the early 1930s the Mufti, “unlike the Istiqlal, strove to channel the anger of Palestinian Arabs toward the Jews rather than the British.” (132, 134)

With the rise of Hitler’s regime, Husseini and other “reactionary pan-Islamists” became sympathetic to Nazism due to “the hatred for the Jews that obsessed these two distinct worldviews, one religious and the other racial, both of which essentialized the enemy,” despite Hitler’s open contempt for Arabs as an “inferior race” and the Nazi regime’s policy of facilitating German Jews’ emigration to Palestine. (139)

Husseini nonetheless played a significant role in sabotaging the 1936 Palestinian general strike that opened the historic revolt of 1936-’39. The rebellion resumed full force following the 1937 Peel Commission recommendation for the partition of Palestine, at which point Husseini turned toward an open alliance with Germany and fled into exile to avoid arrest. After being so conciliatory toward the British authorities while inside Palestine, the exiled Mufti now “set out on a campaign of nationalist one-upmanship, becoming as intransigent as the Qassamists” who were waging the uprising under conditions of brutal and murderous British repression.

“In the process,” Achcar argues, “he dragged the Palestinian national movement into its most serious historical error “which, contrary to an often expressed opinion, did not consist in rejecting the partition plans (which) would have been a dishonorable surrender.”

“The major historical error of the Palestinian national movement was rather its rejection of the British white paper of May 17, 1939, after a considerable majority of Parliament in London had approved it. This new document rejected the idea of partitioning Palestine and creating a separate Jewish state there; the British government declared itself in favor of limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine to seventy-five thousand annually for the next five years and of creating an independent Palestinian state within a decade, to be governed jointly, on a proportional basis, by Arabs and Jews.” (142-3)

While the Zionist movement naturally reviled the new policy and the majority of the Higher Arab Committee (the leadership of the Palestinian revolt) including the secular nationalists of Istiqlal were favorable to it, the dominance of Amin al-Husseini led the HAC to reject it “essentially throwing away a victory the Palestinian masses had won in struggle at enormous sacrifice.

Subsequently, in World War II the Mufti in radio broadcasts sought to rally Arabs to the losing side, the Axis powers “an appeal that had at most a marginal effect, but would provide fabulous propaganda ammunition to the Zionist movement and the likes of Leon Uris, even to the present.

Indeed, it’s a striking fact pointed out by historian Peter Novick that the massive Encyclopedia of the Holocaust produced by Yad Vashem, Israel’s holocaust museum, contains an entry on the Mufti “more than twice as long as the articles on Goebbels and Goring, longer than the articles on Himmler and Heydrich combined, longer than the article on Eichmann (and) exceeded in length, but only slightly, by the entry for Hitler.” (Quoted by Achcar, 165)

Achcar also notes that by 1943, "Husseini knew about the genocide" from conversations with Heinrich Himmler personally. He continued to offer inane strategic advice to the Nazis, which was ignored (as were, by the way, secret appeals to the Nazis from a fascistic Zionist splinter "National Military Organization" headed by a future Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir).

## The Lost Options

Until his death in 1974, Husseini continued to turn out self-serving drivel on the world Jewish conspiracy. His real legacy is summed up by Achcar:

"At the stage that the evolving conflict reached after 1945, with the accumulation of defeats under Husseini's disastrous leadership, the only path still open to the Palestinians, if they were to avoid the catastrophe, the Nakba, was to shake off the political influence of this disreputable individual once and for all and, as we have already suggested, seek an understanding with the Jewish partisans of a binational state on the basis of the program formulated by the Arab governments in 1946. This was not the path taken: Husseini's compromising shadow, his execration of the Jews, and his obstinate attachment to a line of conduct that consisted in impotently raining imprecations down on the heads of his adversaries, continued to loom large over the Palestinian movement until its debacle. "(161)

To be sure, the Zionist leadership for its part knew how to take full advantage, as the Israeli historian Simha Flapan points out: Despite Husseini's declining influence and his rejection by many Palestinian leaders and organizations, "Ben-Gurion's profound resistance to the creation of a Palestinian state significantly undermined any resistance to the mufti's blood-and-thunder policies." (Quoted by Achcar, 161)

It was of course tragic that progressive and revolutionary options had been defeated in the Arab world. In earlier chapters on "The Liberal Westernizers" (including the author's father, Joseph Achcar) and "The Marxists," Achcar surveys the views of these once-influential currents.

"All things considered, the attitude of the Palestinian liberals was one of the most remarkable and commendable forms of opposition to Nazism in the world," inasmuch as they absolutely rejected "the enemy of their two enemies" (Zionist encroachment and British colonial power).

Their struggle upheld "an ethical hierarchy that put liberal values, both secular and religious, above every other consideration, in the hope (or, perhaps, wish) that those values would lead the nations fighting for them to render the Palestinians justice." (45)

The crushing of that hope by the Western democracies following World War II would rank among the great cynical betrayals that marked the era, and certainly one of the more destructive. It logically accompanied, however, the West's embrace of Arab family dynasties and presidentialist dictators, from the House of Saud to Saddam Hussein and Hosni Mubarak.

The Marxists in the Arab world often played a proud and honorable role in opposing both anti-Semitism and Zionism, as well as fighting the influence of fascism. Given the many twists and turns of Stalinist policy all too familiar to those who know Communist history, their attachment to Moscow put them more than once in hopelessly contradictory positions.

Ultimately, “Moscow’s 1947 change of heart on the Palestinian question” which took the form of both political and (with the delivery of Czechoslovakian arms) military support for the creation of an Israeli state and that state’s first war against the Arab armies put a sharp brake on [the Arab Communists’] expansion and left them isolated in Arab public opinion for some time to come.” (63)

The vacuum on the Arab left would be filled by nationalist forces” Nasserism in Egypt, the Baath in Syria and Iraq” which had their own contradictions with imperialism but were brutally repressive of left and independent working-class politics, and ultimately failed in their confrontation with Zionism.

## In the Nakba’s Shadow

In Part II, “The Time of the Nakba,” Achcar surveys Arab perspectives on the Jews and the Nazi holocaust during the periods of Nasserism, the PLO, and the recent rise of Islamist resistance. He concludes with a chapter on “Stigmas and Stigmatization,” offering amidst a generally frightening picture some grounds for “guarded optimism in the increasingly tragic context of the Arab-Israeli context.”

In the recent writing of Avraham Burg “with his irreproachable Zionist credentials” and deep family roots in religious Zionism, Achcar cites Burg’s rejection of the twisting of Shoah memory “into an instrument of common and even trite politics” for the Israeli establishment. Achcar juxtaposes Burg’s recognition of the Palestinian tragedy with Edward Said’s understanding of the necessity, as Said called it, “to submit oneself in horror and awe to the special tragedy besetting the Jewish people.” (291, 292, 293)

Such statements stand in powerful contrast to the unbelievably degraded discourse, on the one hand, of the Zionist purveyors of what Norman Finkelstein calls “The Holocaust Industry” and, on the other, what Edward Said called “a creeping, nasty wave of anti-Semitism and hypocritical righteousness insinuating itself into our political thought and rhetoric [among which] the notion that the Jews never suffered and that the Holocaust is an obfuscatory confection created by the Elders of Zion is one that is acquiring too much, far too much, currency.” (Quoted by Achcar, 262)

Among other deplorable phenomena is the influence of a French former Communist turned holocaust-denier Roger Garaudy, “a calamity,” Achcar suggests, “symptomatic of a problem that went deeper than Holocaust denial: namely, the intellectual regression that has been under way in the Arab countries for several decades now, brought on by the decline of the educational system, the curtailment of intellectual freedoms...and the stultification of whole populations by television.” (260) Perhaps that last clause could stand some revision in light of the role of al-Jazeera in broadcasting the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt.

Similar regression has been noted in Jewish Israeli society by a variety of that country’s commentators, driven by multiple factors including the collective moral rot induced by the post-1967 Occupation, the growing strength of the ultra-Orthodox sector as well as the racist anti-democratic politics of many Russian immigrants, and especially the effects of Israel’s economic neoliberal transformation in creating a heavily unequal society and leaving the Jewish as well as Arab poor far behind.

The Nazi holocaust itself was the product of the most frightful regression in history, right in the heart of modern European civilization. No society is immune from its frightful potential. A decent future is never guaranteed; it must be constantly fought for.

Without trying to summarize Achcar’s discussion of the post-1948 era, which is detailed and finely nuanced, it’s

possible to make a certain generalization: When the struggle for Palestinian freedom involves the greatest mass participation and when the internal and global political situation holds the possibility of an authentic solution, the impulses toward “mutual recognition” and even mutual solidarity come to the fore.

We are speaking here of relations between peoples, not diplomatic or political elites. In such moments the cancers of holocaust denial on the Arab side, and “the Arabs always hate us” on the Israeli Jewish side, tend to fade.

## Toward a Human Future

Tragically, in moments like the present one where no solution (whether it’s “two-state” or “one-state” or anything else other than brutality and apartheid) appears on the horizon “and where the hopes that Palestinians and their allies placed in Barack Obama have been as cruelly dashed as any illusions could ever have been” all “the old crap” associated with political and religious reaction tends to re-emerge. And it always serves the interests of the oppressors.

In early 2009, shortly after the height of the Israeli massacre in Gaza, a memorable article appeared in The New York Times about Friday prayers at Cairo’s main Al-Azhar mosque. The sermon, vetted and authorized as always by the Egyptian authorities, whipped up the worshippers with all the rhetoric calling Jews the descendants of pigs and monkeys, despoilers of Jerusalem and the Muslim holy places, and all the rest.

Then at the conclusion the police stood up in the mosque and announced, “prayers are over. It’s time go home” “and home everyone went, because the message was clear. You can listen to all the anti-Jewish hate rants you want every Friday, but if you go into the streets to demand that the Egyptian regime open the Rafah crossing to Gaza, you’ll have your head split open.

Perhaps today’s democratic revolution beginning in Tunisia and Egypt will start to clear away the accumulated poison of political, social and intellectual regression that Gilbert Achcar deplors. These events make The Arabs and the Holocaust an even more timely confrontation with the tangled threads of history and ideology on both the Arab and Jewish sides, locating the origins of the present reality in the hope of transforming it. As he concludes:

“(I)t is not possible to look toward a peaceful future until accounts have been settled with the past and its lessons assimilated. But in order for the efforts of those who are trying to promote mutual comprehension among Arabs and Jews to bear fruit, the violence must come to an end; only then can the political currents inspired by the universal heritage of the Enlightenment drive back, in both the Arab world and Israel, the many forms of political and religious fanaticism that, today, have the wind in their sails.” (296)

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