

# Religious Roots of Islamic Antisemitism

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On October 7, 2023 Jews in Israel suffered the most devastating attack since the Holocaust. The unprovoked assault on Jewish civilians was meant to be as cruel and as terrifying as humanly possible.

- Over 1200 people were killed.<sup>1</sup>
- More than 240 hostages were taken.
- Terrorists shouted with joy and praises to God while shooting children and the elderly.
- Children were killed deliberately in front of their parents, and parents in front of their children.
- The treatment of women was particularly sadistic:
  - Women were gang raped and bloodied, some paraded naked before hostile crowds, some genitally mutilated.
  - Girls suffered broken pelvises from repeated violent rapes.
  - Terrorists laughed while playing with amputated female breasts.
- There were even some beheadings, also people including children burned alive; some children were burned to death in ovens.<sup>2</sup>

The object was not simply to kill people but to destroy their humanity. Many of the victims had liberal views, were sympathetic to Palestinians, and tried to reach out to them.

What can possibly explain this level of hatred?

## **Antisemitism, Not Simply Anti-Israel**

One often hears Palestinian apologists claim that it is not antisemitic to criticize Israel's policies. But these attacks on Jewish civilians, in Israel

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<sup>1</sup> Philissa Cramer, "[Death toll in Israel attack soars past 1,200 as catalog of Hamas horrors is revealed,](#)" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, October 11, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Sales, "[An Israeli First Responder Recalls Tending to the Body of a Baby Burnt in an Oven,](#)" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, October 31, 2023.

especially but also around the world, go far beyond that. They express overt antisemitism:

Calling his parents on the phone of a Jewish woman he had just murdered, a young Hamas terrorist bragged, “Look how many I killed with my own hands! [He had just killed ten Jewish civilians.] Your son killed Jews! Mom, your son is a hero.” His approving mother answered, “I wish I was with you.”<sup>3</sup>

An Arabic annotated copy of *Mein Kampf* was found in a children’s room in a Gaza home used as a terrorist base.<sup>4</sup>



Israeli President Isaac Herzog holds up Arabic *Mein Kampf* found in terrorist’s belongings (Times of Israel)

The forces arrayed against Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah, do not hide their antisemitism. This is from the original Hamas Charter of 1988, still in effect.<sup>5</sup>

“Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.” (Preamble)

“Our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious.” (Introduction)

“Israel, Judaism and Jews challenge Islam and the [Muslim] people.” (Article 28)

“The Zionist plan is limitless. After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook,

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<sup>3</sup> TOI Staff, “[IDF publishes audio of Hamas terrorist calling family to brag about killing Jews](#),” *Times of Israel*, October 25, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> TOI Staff, “[Arabic Annotated Copy of ‘Mein Kampf’ Found Among Possessions of Terrorist in Gaza Home](#),” *Times of Israel*, November 12, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> “[Hamas Covenant 1988: The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement](#),” Yale Law School: Lillian Goldman Law Library.

they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying.” (Article 32)

“Initiatives, and so-called peaceful solutions and international conferences, are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement.” (Article 13)

“The Day of Judgement will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees.” (Article 7, quoting the hadith, the traditional collected sayings of Muhammad)

Hamas never rescinded this charter. It did issue another document in 2017 that superficially appeared to temper some of this extremist language. But the changes were purely cosmetic. The new document still calls for the destruction of Israel and the establishment of “Palestine” in the entire territory, not just the West Bank and Gaza. And it still links “Zionism” to the Jewish people.

Hezbollah (“Party of God,” organized around religious principles), Israel’s adversary to the north, is no better. They have made it clear that their animosity is not just toward Israel but toward Jews.

As odious as Zionism is to Hizbu’llah, *the party insists that its strong aversion to Judaism is unrelated to its abomination of Zionism, and hence exists irrespective of the existence of Zionism.* According to Hizbu’llah’s interpretation of the Qur’an and the Old and New Testaments, from time immemorial the Jews have continuously demonstrated their quintessentially evil nature. [Shaykh Na’im] Qasim [Hezbollah deputy secretary general] expresses this view succinctly: “*The history of Jews has proven that, regardless of the Zionist proposal, they are a people who are evil in their ideas. From the very origins of their existence, the Jews ‘created mischief for people’ wherever they went.*”<sup>6</sup>

*It is against this historical and scriptural backdrop that Hizbu’llah’s struggle against Israel can be viewed as a continuation of Muhammad’s conflict with the Jews of his day.* In fact, many Hizbu’llah rallies feature the popular victory call: ‘*Khaybar, Khaybar ya Yahud, jayshu Muhammad sawfa ya’ud*’ (“Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the army of Muhammad will return”). *The parallels drawn between the Battle of Khaybar and the resistance to the Israeli occupation are symptomatic of the historicism employed by the party in its depiction of its struggle with Israel.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu’llah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 174 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 177 (emphasis added).

I have italicized passages emphasizing history to highlight the continuing importance of the history of Muhammad and the Jews, which we are soon to describe, in informing present-day antisemitic Islamic attitudes.

Hamas and Hezbollah are proxies of their sponsor Iran, the power behind the scenes. The Iranian regime also makes no secret of its antisemitism. In addition to its military campaign against Israel it propagates anti-Jewish conspiracies and Holocaust denial.<sup>8</sup> Iran was also involved in the planning and execution of the October 7 massacre, which ignited the Gaza War.<sup>9</sup> *The term “Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” is a misnomer: Israel is not just fighting Palestinians, but attacks by Iran both direct and acting through its agents close to Israel’s border.*

Here are a couple more examples illustrating the importance of the role played by Islamic historical consciousness:

*“Read history, and you will understand that the Jews of yesterday are the evil fathers of the Jews of today, who are evil offspring, infidels, distorters of [others’] words, calf-worshippers, prophet-murderers, prophecy-deniers... the scum of the human race ‘whom Allah cursed and turned into apes and pigs....’ These are the Jews, an ongoing continuum of deceit, obstinacy, licentiousness, evil, and corruption.” – Sheikh Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais, Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.<sup>10</sup>*

*“A Muslim woman sat next to a Jewish goldsmith in the Banu Qaynuqa market. The goldsmith tied the edge of her garment to her back without her noticing. When she got up, she revealed her private parts. The Jews then laughed at her, she screamed, and a Muslim man jumped on the goldsmith and killed him. The Jews then attacked the Muslim and killed him.” – Palestinian textbook used in UNRWA schools.<sup>11</sup>*

This last example comes from the life of Muhammad and exemplifies the projection of Muhammad’s antipathy toward the Jews of his day onto the Jews of today. Scholars consider the incident fictitious, but it still exerts influence on Muslim attitudes toward Jews.<sup>12</sup> For many decades textbooks used in Palestinian schools have been used to inculcate young children in

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<sup>8</sup> Luke Tress, [“Iran State News Outlet Spreads Antisemitic Propaganda on Social Media, Report Says,”](#) Times of Israel, May 4, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> [“Iranian Officials Acknowledge Iran’s Role In Planning and Executing October 7 Hamas Invasion And Massacres In Southern Israel,”](#) Middle East Media Research Institute, July 0, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Aluma Solnick, [“Muslim Clerics - Jews Are the Descendants of Apes, Pigs, and Other Animals,”](#) Jewish Virtual Library, October 31, 2002 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> See the conclusion of this essay for exact citation and further examples.

<sup>12</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (London: Oxford University Press), 130.

the hatred and dehumanization of Jews. This is a major factor in perpetuating the conflict.

The antisemitic character of much opposition to Israel is particularly evident in many recent campus demonstrations. Jewish students have been harassed and intimidated and sometimes physically assaulted or prevented from moving freely about the campus. The following are some slogans demonstrators were heard shouting, often to the loud beating of drums:<sup>13</sup>

“Burn Tel Aviv!”

“Go back to Poland!”

“Never forget the seventh of October!”

“The Seventh of October will be every day for you!”

”F--- you Zionists, F--- you Jews!”

“We don’t want no two states, we want 1948!”

“Jews Jews we don’t want no Jews here!”

This banner, reading “Long Live October 7!” could be seen at a number of demonstrations, including one at New York City’s Union Square and at a memorial to the victims of October 7:<sup>14,15</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> PBS, *Frontline*, broadcast June 11, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> David Propper, “[Anti-Israel Mob Chanting ‘Long Live Intifada’ Lights Flares Outside Nyc Exhibit That Memorializes Oct. 7 Nova Music Festival Victims](#),” *New York Post*, June 10, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> David Propper, “[NYC Anti-Israel Protesters Unfurl ‘Long Live October 7’ Banner as Mob Harasses Reporter](#),” *New York Post*, June 11, 2024.

## Now to the History

The principal sources of Islamic historical consciousness are these:

The *Qur'an*: considered the word of God transmitted to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel.

The *hadith*: collected sayings and traditions of Muhammad. These are the most important Hadith collections:

- *Sahih Bukhari*, compiled by the Imam Muhammad ibn-Isma'il al-Bukhari (810-870).
- *Sahih Muslim*, compiled by Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri (821-975).

The *sira*: earliest Arabic biographies of Muhammad. Most important:

- *Sirat Rasul Allah* by Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. 767), revised by his disciple 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham (d. 833).

The tension that exists today between Muslims and Jews is not an entirely modern phenomenon. Muhammad came into conflict with the Jewish tribes of his time, and this conflict ended in tragedy. Throughout the history of Islam Muhammad's reported anti-Jewish sentiments, preserved in the Qur'an and hadith, have affected relations between Muslims and Jews. Muhammad's victories over the Jews have found echoes in shouts uttered in both verbal and physical attacks on Jews, such as the victory chant over the battle of Khaybar cited above, Muhammad's last decisive defeat of Arabia's Jews. Radical Islamists see Jews as enemies of Islam since the time of Muhammad. They aim not for peaceful coexistence but for total elimination. Today antisemitism reverberates throughout the Muslim world, sometimes erupting with vicious intensity – this is what happened on October 7, 2023. Muhammad's own reported teachings, drawn from the hadith and the history recounted below, are often used to justify this violence.

Apologists for Islam traditionally blame the Jews for their troubled relations with Muhammad, accusing them of breaking treaties and colluding with Muhammad's enemies. The truth is hardly that simple. Even the early Arabic sources, clearly biased in favor of Muhammad, tell a story that puts

this narrative into serious question. We will look at these sources to understand the roots of this Muslim-Jewish tension.

The earliest biographies were written during the eighth and ninth centuries, by writers who recorded what they knew of Muhammad from oral traditions that they tried as best they could to authenticate. These biographies are called *sira*, and together with the hadith they constitute the *sunna* ("way," "example," or "tradition") of Islam. The earliest and most important of the *sira* is the *Sirat Rasul Allah* by Muhammad ibn Ishaq, mentioned above. We do not have this work in its original form, but in a revised and abridged version by his disciple 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham. Other early Arabic biographies of Muhammad are by Muhammad ibn Umar al-Waqidi (d. 822), Muhammad ibn Sa'd (d. 845), and Abu Jafar al-Tabari (d. 923). In this essay we'll be relying on the principal source, Ibn Ishaq.

When the Jewish leaders of Medina first heard of the coming of a prophet preaching belief in one God, they were intrigued. They did not immediately accept or reject him, but they wanted to know more (Ibn Ishaq, 192).<sup>16</sup> Relations began to deteriorate as the Jews discovered Muhammad was not very familiar with their scriptures and traditions. The rabbis would taunt him with questions he could not answer.<sup>17</sup>

The Jews' rejection of Muhammad's message must have disappointed him greatly. He saw himself preaching the same monotheism to which the Jews subscribed – why then wouldn't they accept him as a prophet? To establish his affinity with the Jews, he borrowed some Jewish practices and prescribed them to his followers. Muslims were to meet for prayer on Friday afternoon as Jews prepare for the sabbath, they were to face Jerusalem in prayer as Jews do, they were to observe some of the Jewish dietary laws, as well as the fast on the Day of Atonement. Muslims called this the fast of *Ashura*, meaning "tenth," since the Day of Atonement falls on the tenth of the Jewish month of Tishri. When the Jews rejected his prophecy in spite of these practices, Muhammad changed those practices, fixing the *qibla*

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<sup>16</sup> Alfred Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955; reprint, Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1967), 192. (These numbers refer to the original pagination, standard across different editions.) Much of this material is included in F.E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

(direction of prayer) to Mecca instead of Jerusalem as was the Jewish practice, and replacing Ashura with the fast of Ramadan.

### **The First Jewish Tribe: The Fate of the Banu Qaynuqa**

At the time of Muhammad there were three Jewish tribes in Medina; the first to be dealt with were the Banu Qaynuqa. In his dealings with them, Muhammad's aspirations to be accepted as a Jewish prophet as well as his frustration and anger became very apparent.

After the battle of Badr, Muhammad called the Banu Qaynuqa to assemble in the marketplace. He demanded the Jews accept him as their prophet; he threatened them, and they responded with defiance:

When God smote Quraysh at Badr, the apostle assembled the Jews in the market of the B. Qaynuqa when he came to Medina *and called on them to accept Islam before God should treat them as he had treated Quraysh*. They answered, "Don't deceive yourself, Muhammad. You have killed a number of inexperienced Quraysh who did not know how to fight. But if you fight us you will learn that we are men and that you have met your equal." So God sent down concerning their words: "Say to those who disbelieve, You will be defeated and gathered into hell, a wretched resting- place."<sup>18</sup>

The apostle assembled them in their market and addressed them as follows: "O Jews, beware lest God bring upon you the vengeance that He brought upon Quraysh and become Muslims. You know that I am a prophet who has been sent – you will find that in your scriptures and God's covenant with you." They replied, "O Muhammad, you seem to think that we are your people. Do not deceive yourself because you encountered a people with no knowledge of war and got the better of them; for by God if we fight you, you will find that we are real men!"<sup>19</sup>

Muhammad is then said to have received the following revelation:

"Say to those who disbelieve: You will be vanquished and gathered to Hell, an evil resting place. You have already had a sign in the two forces which met"; i.e. the apostle's companions at Badr and the Quraysh. "One force fought in the way of God; the other, disbelievers, thought they saw double their own force with their very eyes. God strengthens with His help whom He will. Verily in that is an example for the discerning."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 383 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 545 (emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; also Qur'an 3:12-13.

At this point Ibn Hisham inserts the following incident into Ibn Ishaq's narrative:

The cause of the Qaynuqa affair was that an Arab woman had come with some merchandise to the market of the Banu Qaynuqa. She sat down next to a goldsmith there. Then they began urging her to unveil her face, which she refused. The goldsmith moved close to the hem of her garment and tied it behind her back. When she got up her [privates] were exposed. They laughed at her, and she screamed. Then a Muslim jumped upon the goldsmith who was Jewish and killed him. Then the Jews overwhelmed the Muslim and killed him. The family of the slain Muslim called upon their coreligionists for help against the Jews. The Muslims were furious, and thus there was bad blood created between them and the Banu Qaynuqa.<sup>21</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the historicity of this incident has been questioned:

Little credence need be given to the story of the trick, for it also appears in legends of pre-Islamic Arabia; but there may well have been some quarrel between Muslims and Jews. The deeper reason for Muhammad's action, however, are obvious. The Jews were not prepared to become full members of the Islamic community, and therefore he had broken with them. They still had agreements of some sort with him, but he would be on the look-out to take advantage of any failure to fulfil the letter of the agreements. This is presumably what happened here.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, the incident is often mentioned to explain Muhammad's violent reaction. Whether or not the incident is historical, its inclusion shows the biographer's need to provide a pretext for Muhammad's actions against the Qaynuqa. Muhammad besieged them and in two weeks forced them to surrender unconditionally – at best, an act of collective punishment. He would have killed them all, but spared their lives only at the behest of the leader of a neighboring Arab tribe, who pleaded on their behalf.<sup>23</sup> Muhammad then exiled the Banu Qaynuqa from Medina, eventually driving them out of Arabia completely.

By eliminating one community of nonbelievers Muhammad further strengthened his position. But he was not yet finished.

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 122-23. (The incident is omitted in Guillaume's abridged English translation.)

<sup>22</sup> Watt, *Muhammad*, 130.

<sup>23</sup> Guillaume, *Life*, 546.

## The Second Jewish Tribe: Banu Nadir

Tensions had been growing between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes of Medina. While the Arab tribes were gradually being drawn to Islam, the Jews, already having a monotheistic faith and feeling no need for another prophet, held out. This weakened the ties between the Jews and those Arab tribes with which they were allied. Also, as we have seen, Muhammad began to threaten the Jews once they failed to show enthusiasm for Islam. Because of these developments the Jews felt isolated and endangered, and their sympathies naturally began to incline toward Muhammad's Meccan enemies.

Muhammad's harsh treatment of the Banu Qaynuqa must have alarmed the other Jewish tribes. Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, a leader and poet of the Banu Nadir, composed verses lamenting the Meccan defeat at Badr and satirizing Muhammad. This enraged Muhammad, so he had Ka'b assassinated, telling the killers it would be OK to lie in order to gain the confidence of their victim.<sup>24</sup>

The final showdown between Muhammad and the Banu Nadir unfolded in a rather strange way. The narrative is long and somewhat confusing, but the result was that a follower of Muhammad killed two men of the tribe of Amir in a case of mistaken identity. So Muhammad had to pay blood money to the tribe of Amir for the lives of these two men. He agreed to do so both to avoid a vendetta and in hopes of winning the Amir tribe to Islam.

Muhammad now had to raise the money for the blood payment. He went to the Banu Nadir to get them to pay a part of it. He felt that the Jewish tribe should contribute because it had an alliance with the Banu Amir, and also because of the mutual defense pact that Muhammad had imposed on the tribes of Medina.

Muhammad's demands rested on very shaky ground. The Banu Amir were the tribe that his follower had wronged, and so their ally the Banu Nadir could not in justice be held liable. Furthermore, according to the pact that Muhammad himself had written, "The Jews must bear their expenses and the Muslims their expenses," and "A man is not liable for his ally's misdeeds."<sup>25</sup> Muhammad thus had no basis for requiring the Banu Nadir to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 550-51.; also hadith, *Sahih Bukhari* 5:59:369.

<sup>25</sup> Guillaume, *Life*, 343.

contribute. And in any case, Muhammad's murder of Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, for which he paid no blood money, effectively annulled any treaty between himself and the Banu Nadir. The Banu Nadir thus most likely regarded Muhammad's approach, with good reason, as an attempt at extortion.

Perhaps not really knowing what to do, the Jews signaled their agreement, then asked Muhammad to wait with his delegation while they prepared a meal. Meanwhile Muhammad excused himself and left the house. His companions went looking for him, and when they found him he told them an angel had revealed to him that the Banu Nadir were plotting to kill him. He then sent the Banu Nadir an ultimatum, demanding that they all leave the country within ten days or else be beheaded.<sup>26</sup> One hadith provides a direct quote:

Narrated Abu Huraira: While we were in the mosque, Allah's Apostle came out and said, "Let us proceed to the Jews." So we went out with him till we came to Bait-al-Midras. The Prophet stood up there and called them, saying, "O assembly of Jews! *Surrender to Allah (embrace Islam) and you will be safe!*" They said, "You have conveyed Allah's message, O Aba-al-Qasim." Allah's Apostle then said to them, "That is what I want; *embrace Islam and you will be safe.*" They said, "You have conveyed the message, O Aba-al-Qasim." Allah's Apostle then said to them, "That is what I want," and repeated his words for the third time and added, "Know that the earth is for Allah and I want to exile you from this land, so whoever among you has property he should sell it, otherwise, know that the land is for Allah and His Apostle."<sup>27</sup>

Once again we see Muhammad's attempt to force the Jews to convert to Islam. Muhammad's accusation of a plot to assassinate him seems an obvious fabrication. There is no "evidence" save for the alleged word of an angel.

Muhammad's motivation was most likely not revenge for a presumed assassination plot. Enmity was increasing between the Muslims and the Jews, Muhammad had murdered the poet of the Banu Nadir, and might well expect them to retaliate. The hadith just quoted supplies another motive as well: Muhammad wanted Arabia only for Muslims. ("It has been narrated by 'Umar b. al-Khattib that he heard the Messenger of Allah [may

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 202.

<sup>27</sup> *Sahih Bukhari* 9:92:447 (emphasis added).

peace be upon him] say: I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslim.”<sup>28</sup>)

And so Muhammad laid siege to the Banu Nadir, who held out in their forts as long as they could. Help expected from allied tribes never came – their members had already embraced Islam, or were intimidated by Muhammad. Finally, when Muhammad cut down the palm trees of the Banu Nadir and burned them, their courage dissolved. They surrendered and Muhammad forced them into exile, then divided their property between himself and his followers.

The Qur’an attaches religious significance to these events:

Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, let it declare the Praises and Glory of Allah: for He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. It is He Who got out the Unbelievers among the People of the Book from their homes at the first gathering (of the forces). Little did ye think that they would get out: And they thought that their fortresses would defend them from Allah! But the (Wrath of) Allah came to them from quarters from which they little expected (it), and cast terror into their hearts, so that they destroyed their dwellings by their own hands and the hands of the Believers, take warning, then, O ye with eyes (to see)! And had it not been that Allah had decreed Banishment for them, He would certainly have punished them in this world: And in the Hereafter they shall (certainly) have the Punishment of the Fire. That is because they resisted Allah and His Messenger: and if any one resists Allah, verily Allah is severe in Punishment. Whether ye cut down (O ye Muslim!) The tender palm-trees, or ye left them standing on their roots, it was by leave of Allah, and in order that He might cover with shame the rebellious transgressors.<sup>29</sup>

“Resisting” Muhammad, refusing to accept him on his terms, was considered grounds for divine condemnation. The chilling vindictiveness of Allah called down upon the Banu Nadir, in this world and in the world to come, places on this episode the stamp of *jihad*.

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<sup>28</sup> *Sahih Muslim* 19:4366.

<sup>29</sup> Qur’an 59:1-5, trans. Yusuf Ali.

## **The Third Jewish Tribe: Banu Quraiza**

Muhammad's dealings with the Jewish tribe of Quraiza may well be the most controversial episode of his career. A number of writers have defended Muhammad's actions against the Jewish tribe, claiming that the Jews betrayed him by supporting his enemies during the crucial Battle of the Trench. Once again, a careful examination of the sources will show that the truth is not that simple. Whether or not one questions the sources' authenticity, one cannot question that they portray Muhammad as Islamic tradition understands him, the best of God's prophets and an example to be followed. Radical Islamists have in fact invoked such episodes in the recorded life of Muhammad as precedent for their violent actions.

After having defeated the Meccans at Badr, Muhammad knew that eventually a reprisal would come. The Meccans had to restore their prestige, as well as defend their tribal honor. Muhammad continued to attack their caravans, and the Meccans could not allow that. Their leader Abu Sufyan mobilized his forces and set out against Muhammad at what became known as the Battle of Uhud. He was not totally victorious against the Muslims, but he did inflict a major if temporary setback. Muhammad recovered and increased the scope of his raids.

Finally Abu Sufyan resolved to make an end of Muhammad once and for all. He raised a large army and set out to lay siege to Medina. Muhammad prepared by digging a huge trench around the vulnerable areas of Medina's perimeter. This effectively stopped the Meccans, who greatly depended on their cavalry, now rendered useless. The Meccan tribes gave up and went their separate ways. Greatly humiliated, they never again posed a serious challenge to the Muslims.

We now come to the role of the Jews of Quraiza. The following reconstruction is based exclusively on the Arabic sources. Admittedly these sources are biased against the Jews; even so they allow an unflattering evaluation of Muhammad's response.

As the two sides prepared for battle, the Banu Quraiza wanted to remain neutral, but after strong and unrelenting pressure from the chief of the exiled Banu Nadir, Ka'b ibn Asad, the head of the the Banu Quraiza, decided to support the Meccan coalition. Through his intelligence sources Muhammad found this out, so he devised a clever plan to neutralize the

support from Quraiza. He sent an infiltrator to sow dissension between Quraiza and the Meccans, leading each to suspect a sellout by the other. Thus when the time of battle arrived and the Meccans approached Quraiza for aid, the latter refused, asking for a sign of trust the Meccans were unwilling to give.<sup>30</sup> And so help from Quraiza, which might have been decisive, never came.

When Muhammad sent this infiltrator he made his often-quoted statement that “war is deception.”<sup>31</sup> Those words have been used for centuries to justify lying by Muslims in the name of jihad.

When Muhammad returned from battle, he received an angelic revelation directing him to attack the Jews:

When the Prophet returned from Al-Khandaq (i.e. Trench) and laid down his arms and took a bath, Gabriel came and said (to the Prophet), “You have laid down your arms? By Allah, we angels have not laid them down yet. So set out for them.” The Prophet said, “Where to go?” Gabriel said, “Towards this side,” pointing towards Banu Quraiza. So the Prophet went out towards them.<sup>32</sup>

Muhammad marched against the Quraiza and besieged them for twenty-five days. The Quraiza, desperate and terrified, knew they had run out of options. They asked Muhammad to send them Abu Lubaba of the tribe of Aws, a tribe with which the Quraiza had formerly been allied. Even though many of the Aws had now become Muslims, they and the Quraiza had once been friends, and the Quraiza needed someone to turn to for advice.

Then they sent to the apostle saying, “Send us Abu Lubaba... That we may consult him.” So the apostle sent him to them, and when they saw him they got up to meet him. The women and children went up to him weeping in his face, and he felt sorry for them. They said, “Oh Abu Lubaba, do you think that we should submit to Muhammad’s judgment?” He said, “Yes,” and pointed with his hand to his throat, signifying slaughter.<sup>33</sup>

The next morning the Quraiza surrendered. The tribesmen of Aws approached Muhammad to intercede on their behalf, pleading for leniency. Muhammad then asked them if they would be satisfied if one of their own

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<sup>30</sup> Guillaume, *Life*, 682.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 681.

<sup>32</sup> *Sahih Bukhari* 5:59:443; parallel in Guillaume, *Life*, 684.

<sup>33</sup> Guillaume, *Life*, 686.

might make the determination of Quraiza's fate. The Aws enthusiastically agreed. Muhammad then chose Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, one of their leaders.

The choice of Sa'd was significant, and hardly accidental. Sa'd had a well-known reputation for being both extremely ruthless and an enemy of the Jews. At the battle of Badr he objected when he saw some of Muhammad's men holding some enemy prisoners, and he told Muhammad: "It is the first defeat that God has brought on the infidel and I would rather see them slaughtered than left alive."<sup>34</sup> And when Sa'd was seriously wounded at the Battle of Badr he said, "O God, seeing that you have appointed war between us and them grant me martyrdom and do not let me die until I have seen my desire upon B. Qurayza."<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere Sa'd is described as "a man of hasty temper."<sup>36</sup>

Muhammad surely knew all this about Sa'd, and this must have figured into his choice. A hadith tells us what happened next:

When the tribe of Banu Quraiza was ready to accept Sad's judgment, Allah's Apostle sent for Sad who was near to him. Sad came, riding a donkey and when he came near, Allah's Apostle said (to the Ansar), "Stand up for your leader." Then Sad came and sat beside Allah's Apostle who said to him. "These people are ready to accept your judgment." Sad said, "I give the judgment that their warriors should be killed and their children and women should be taken as prisoners." The Prophet then remarked, "O Sad! You have judged amongst them with (or similar to) the judgment of the King Allah."<sup>37</sup>

In the corresponding place in Ibn Ishaq<sup>38</sup> Muhammad says to Sa'd: "You have given the judgment of Allah above the seven heavens." Clearly Muhammad is pleased. This is the outcome he wanted and expected. And this should come as no surprise. Muhammad wanted to do the same to the other two Jewish tribes, but was restrained and settled for exiling them.

Concerning the Banu Qaynuqa, we read:

'Abdullah b. Ubayy b. Salul [of the tribe of Khazraj in Medina] went to him when God had put them [the Qaynuqa] in his power and said, "O Muhammad, deal kindly with my clients" (now they were allies of Khazraj), but the apostle put him off. He repeated the words, and the apostle turned away from him, whereupon he

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 679.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 675.

<sup>37</sup> *Sahih Bukhari* 4:52:280.

<sup>38</sup> Guillaume, *Life*, 689.

thrust his hand into the collar of the apostle's robe; the apostle was so angry that his face became almost black. He said, "Confound you, let me go." He answered, "No, by God, I will not let you go until you deal kindly with my clients. Four hundred men without mail and three hundred mailed protected me from all mine enemies; would you cut them down in one morning? By God, I am a man who fears that circumstances may change." The apostle said, "You can have them."<sup>39</sup>

Concerning the Banu Nadir, we have already quoted from the Qur'an above:

And had it not been that Allah had decreed Banishment for them, He would certainly have punished them in this world.<sup>40</sup>

Ibn Ishaq<sup>41</sup> takes "punished them in this world" to mean "with the sword." In other words, the Banu Nadir, like the Banu Qaynuqa, got off easy, something not to be repeated with the Quraiza.

This time Muhammad obtained an endorsement of his murderous intent from someone known to be hostile toward the Jews, yet from a tribe formerly allied to them, the Aws, thus making impossible any further protest.

Muhammad went to the market in Medina and dug trenches. Then the men of Quraiza were brought out in batches, and Muhammad and his followers cut off their heads. According to Ibn Ishaq,<sup>42</sup> the number of dead ranged between 600 and 900. Afterwards Muhammad divided their property, their women, and their children among his followers.

A number of *ahadith* supply additional details. How did Muhammad distinguish the adult males, who would be executed, from the children, whose lives would be spared?

Narrated Atiyyah al-Qurazi: I was among the captives of Banu Qurayzah. They (the Companions) examined us, and those who had begun to grow hair (pubes) were killed, and those who had not were not killed. I was among those who had not grown hair.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 546.

<sup>40</sup> Qur'an 59:3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 654.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 690.

<sup>43</sup> *Sunan Abu Dawud*, 38:4390.

“Adult” males marked for death could be very young indeed.

The following hadith is one of the most widely quoted even today to justify antisemitic hatred, and figures in the Hamas Charter:

Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: The last hour would not come unless the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them until the Jews would hide themselves behind a stone or a tree and a stone or a tree would say: Muslim, or the servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him; but the tree Gharqad would not say, for it is the tree of the Jews.<sup>44</sup>

Recall that the Banu Quraiza had already surrendered and no longer posed a threat. Muhammad’s treatment of them was purely vindictive and gratuitous.

### **Final Battle with the Jews: Attack on Khaybar**

Khaybar was an oasis occupied by a wealthy Jewish community. The reasons for Muhammad’s decision to attack it are disputed, but it is best thought of as a continuation of the enmity between Muhammad and the Banu Nadir, since the survivors of Muhammad’s earlier battle with them took refuge there. Its wealth also made it a tempting target. Muhammad laid siege to the community and the Jews surrendered. Muhammad forced them to leave or pay a heavy *jizya* tax of one-half of their produce. The following verse, which mentions the “People of the Book” (ie. Jews), may refer to it:

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, [even if they are] of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.<sup>45</sup>

Some Islamic scholars also refer the following verse to the battle of Khaybar:

Allah has promised you many gains that ye shall acquire, and He has given you these beforehand; and He has restrained the hands of men from you; that it may be a Sign for the Believers, and that He may guide you to a Straight Path.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Sahih Muslim* 41:6985, 41:6981-84; *Sahih Bukhari* 4:52:176,177, 4:56:791.

<sup>45</sup> Qur’an 9:29.

<sup>46</sup> Qur’an 48:20.

The suggestion here is that the wealth of the community was indeed a factor, as well as an Islamic sense of entitlement.

### **The Jews of Arabia: Conclusion**

How do we evaluate this material? Many have tried to justify Muhammad's actions: Seventh-century Arabia was a tough neighborhood. Tribal vengeance was common. Members of different tribes had no responsibilities toward each other. Had Muhammad allowed the Quraiza to live, they would have remained a threat to him. Muhammad, unlike Jesus, was a statesman and had to do what he did.

Even Karen Armstrong, who takes great pains to justify everything Muhammad did, can hardly keep from showing her revulsion:

It is probably impossible for us to dissociate this story from Nazi atrocities and it will inevitably alienate people irrevocably from Muhammad. But Western scholars like Maxime Rodinson and W. Montgomery Watt argue that it is not correct to judge the incident by twentieth-century standards. This was a very primitive society – far more primitive than the Jewish society in which Jesus had lived and promulgated his gospel of mercy and love some 600 years earlier. At this stage the Arabs had no concept of a universal natural law, which is difficult – perhaps impossible – for people to attain unless there is a modicum of public order, such as that imposed by a great empire in the ancient world.<sup>47</sup>

This is quite astonishing. Muhammad, held up as a great spiritual leader and founder of a great religion, is to be judged by the standard of his time, as a member of “a very primitive society” that knew no “universal natural law” but only the law of the jungle. The great spiritual figures of other religious traditions were not simply products of their times; they were ahead of their times. They were conciliators, and they courageously opposed the inhumane trends of their times. Muhammad made no attempts at conciliation, except when it was politically expedient. He demanded that others convert to Islam and recognize him as a prophet; otherwise he fought them ruthlessly. Those who refused were not approached with peace and tolerance but preemptively eliminated. Muhammad, quite in contrast to Jesus, was a man of extreme vengeance and cruelty. To justify

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<sup>47</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperCollins, 1992), 207-8.

his actions as merely a product of his times is hardly the standard one expects of a great spiritual leader.

Even though Armstrong mentions W. Montgomery Watt, his assessment is more balanced than she suggests:

So much must be said in fairness to Muhammad when he is measured against the Arabs of his time. Muslims, however, claim that he is a model of conduct and character for all mankind. In so doing they present him for judgment according to the standards of enlightened world opinion.<sup>48</sup>

This is the real question. Muhammad undoubtedly was a gifted, even brilliant military leader and statesman. But do those qualities make him an outstanding spiritual leader, one to be imitated by all?

Muslim writers often fail to judge Muhammad by a uniform standard. They condemn the Quraiza for their “treachery,” but this is unfair even by the standards of Muhammad’s own time. The Quraiza had every reason to distrust and to oppose Muhammad. He had previously exiled Medina’s other two Jewish tribes. Why should the Quraiza have expected to be treated any better? Why should they not have tried to resist him? By remaining faithful to their own religion, they stood in the way of Muhammad’s vision of a unified Arabia exclusively under Islam. It is hypocritical to defend Muhammad’s tribalism while blaming the Quraiza for theirs.

The fact is that the Quraiza inflicted no damage on Muhammad. He had effectively neutralized their opposition, and they refused to cooperate with the Meccans against Muhammad. One hadith from the respected collection of Imam Ahmad (d. 855) reports:

Abu Sufyan [a leader of the Qurayshi opposition to Muhammad] said, “O ye people of Quraysh, by Allah your [current] dwelling isn’t a place to be dwelled in; the horses [and camels, mules, etc..] have died, Banu Quraytha has turned us down – we received from them what we don’t like, and this wind is giving us what you see [a hard time]. By Allah, our cauldrons aren’t standing, the fires aren’t lasting, and the structures aren’t holding. So retreat for I am retreating.”<sup>49</sup>

The Banu Quraiza “turned us down”; they never did give active support to the Meccans at the Battle of the Trench. Nevertheless, they were punished

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<sup>48</sup> Watt, *Muhammad*, 235.

<sup>49</sup> *Musnad Ahmad* 22823; cf. Guillaume, *Life*, 683.

severely. Instead of being exiled, as were the Banu Qaynuqa and Banu Nadir, they were executed, in a tribal conflict in which Muhammad cannot be said to have held any moral advantage. Yes, everybody did it, that is what Arabia was like in those days. Members of rival tribes attacked each other all the time, and no tribe was morally superior to another. While Arabian society had no legal system similar to what we have today, it did have a respected custom of blood-guilt. Those who drew blood from another tribe were responsible for making it up, either in blood or in kind. One did not respond to an offense by liquidating the whole tribe. Such collective punishment is even prohibited by the Qur'an: "Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another."<sup>50</sup>

In intent and in action, Muhammad was a mass murderer. He engaged in the practice of beheading his enemies, as do some of today's terrorists who claim to follow his example. Today we have a name for forced large-scale exile. We call it ethnic cleansing. We have a name for the extermination of an entire tribe. We call it genocide.

In a weakly argued and logically flawed piece, W. N. Arafat tries to show that the massacre of the Quraiza never took place.<sup>51</sup> Even if he is correct, the point is moot. The Muhammad whom Islam venerates is the one reflected in these biographies and *ahadith*, which belong to the *sunna*, the traditional teachings of Islam. These teachings are sources of spiritual guidance. And so if one defends Muhammad as *both* a great spiritual leader and a man of his time, then one makes his time normative for our time.

As Muhammad's power grew, so did his ambition. His mission became the unification of the Arab tribes under one faith, as a nation strong enough to challenge even the great empires. There was no room in this new nation for those who would not accept his prophecy. This meant in particular the Jews, since they were the major holdouts – even the Meccan tribes eventually adopted Islam. Any continuing organized Jewish presence in Arabia was a threat to Muhammad's vision, and so had to be eliminated. Islamic tradition records this sentiment in the following *ahadith*:

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<sup>50</sup> Qur'an 6:164.

<sup>51</sup> W. M. Arafat, "New Light on the Story of Banu Qurayza and the Jews of Medina," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, (1976), 100-107.

It has been narrated by ‘Umar b. al-Khattib that he heard the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) say: I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslim.<sup>52</sup>

Malik said that Ibn Shihab said, “Umar ibn al-Khattab searched for information about that until he was absolutely convinced that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, had said, ‘Two *deens* [religions] shall not co-exist in the Arabian Peninsula,’ and he therefore expelled the Jews from Khaybar.”<sup>53</sup>

While Muhammad wanted Arabia only for Muslims, there was special enmity toward the Jewish people: after they refused to recognize him as a prophet and follow him they were never forgiven. Thus were planted the seeds of an antagonism that has persisted to this day. Muhammad’s expulsion of the Jews from Arabia became the prototype for the project of driving Israel out of the Middle East.

## Going Deeper

On October 7, 2023 the world witnessed a massacre of over 1200 Jews in Israel by terrorists claiming to be inspired by Islam. This was by no means the first such attack by Muslims against Jewish civilians – throughout history there have been many – but it was the worst on record. The cruelty was unimaginable. Children were not spared. Worst of all was the treatment of women: tortured, their bodies mutilated with sharp instruments while they were being gang-raped, then afterwards summarily executed. This was a denial of the Jews’ humanity. The idea that human beings could do this to each other defies belief, and yet it happened.

We have seen how roots of the conflict between Muslims and Jews go back as far as the time of Muhammad. It is possible to go even deeper into how the religious nature of this conflict accounts for its intensity. But before doing so, *it is critical to keep the following consideration in mind.*

While it is possible to identify broad historical patterns, those patterns do not determine the character and behavior of any individual. To any rule there are always exceptions. Throughout history individuals have always shown kindness to each other. The Albanian Muslims shielded their Jews from the Holocaust. There are stories of individual Muslims helping Jews

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<sup>52</sup> *Sahih Muslim* 19:4366.

<sup>53</sup> *Malik’s Muwatta* 45.5.18.

during Muslim anti-Jewish riots. And there are also Muslims working toward reform, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, all within the sphere of Islam.<sup>54</sup> So there is no excuse for discrimination, and one must never assume anything about any Muslim individual without knowing that person, just as neither Jews nor members of any other group should ever be prejudged. Everything in our power, including uncompromising self-examination, must be done to minimize gratuitous hatred and even hate crimes.

Nevertheless, hatred of Jews is so widespread and so intense throughout the Muslim world as to constitute a pattern that begs for an explanation. As with Christian antisemitism, it must be rooted to some significant extent in religion, for religion affects the human psyche on a very primitive level. Historical circumstances alone cannot explain it. And so it bears further investigation. When virtually the entire Muslim world arrays itself against the Jewish state, initiating one war after another against it, one wants to understand why.

The hatred the Hamas terrorists had for their Jewish victims was metaphysical. To wish to inflict as much pain and humiliation as possible on someone, and to do it with such joy, is beyond anything rationally conceivable. It is hard to imagine what besides a religious impulse could inspire a hatred that deep and that dehumanizing. If Muhammad had serious problems with all the Arabian Jews, then they must be children of the devil.<sup>55</sup> And so, for those inspired by this kind of religious ideology, no treatment of Jews could possibly be too harsh.

This may explain why, throughout the Muslim world and particularly in the Arab states, there has been almost universal antagonism and opposition toward the State of Israel ever since its founding. The Arab states banded together several times in efforts to eradicate Israel, though none of them succeeded. Now Iran, not Arab but Shiite Muslim, is hell-bent on finishing the job. Very large segments of the Muslim world seem motivated by a special animus against Jews. It is hard to imagine that if Israel had been any kind of a state other than a Jewish one it would be meeting the same level of animosity. It should be noted that Jordan and Egypt occupied the

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<sup>54</sup> E.g. Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> Christianity, which in its worst forms has inspired similar levels of hatred and violence against Jews, has within its scriptures a similar characterization (John 8:44).

Palestinian territories for two decades before Israel seized them in the 1967 war, yet that was never considered a problem. *If the Arab states really cared about giving the Palestinians a state of their own, they could easily have done so when they had the power.*

It is often said that Muslim-Jewish relations throughout history were not always bad. It is true that in medieval Spain Muslims were not burning Jews at the stake, as Christians often did. But that is a very low standard to set. At certain times – not at all times – Jews could live a relatively tranquil life under Muslim rule as long as they knew their place as *dhimmi*, second-class “protected” minorities, never equals and often subject to humiliation. What the Muslim world seems unable to tolerate and resents to its core is a sovereign Jewish presence in their midst, where Jews are equal to them and in control of their own lives, even in a tiny country like Israel. It is only the Gulf States’ fear of Shiite Iran that has made even modest efforts toward normalization possible.

The Hamas Charter expresses these sentiments clearly: “Israel, Judaism and Jews challenge Islam and the Muslim people” (Article 28). Hamas sees its struggle as a religious one, and its enemy is not just Israel but Jews and Judaism. Jews are the enemy of Islam, cursed by Allah, and thus deserving the most extreme hatred. Killing Jews is in fact a sacred duty: the Hamas terrorists did not try to hide their crimes; to the contrary, they bragged about them and broadcast them on social media. We already mentioned the young October 7 terrorist who called himself a hero and boasted to his parents that he had just murdered ten Jews.

As horrendous as all of this is, it is hardly just an aberration. Massive demonstrations erupted worldwide supporting Hamas and its October 7 attack. In none of these could be heard any reservations about how Hamas had treated their Jewish victims. Even demonstrators who might not have engaged in such violence themselves expressed strong sympathy with it. The chant often heard, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!” is a clear call for the destruction of Israel.

So let’s look a little deeper at the possible origins of this special antipathy toward Israel.

The two driving forces behind modern antisemitism are the unreformed forms of Christianity and Islam, and parallels exist between them that may

prove instructive. I have treated the Christian case elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> To encapsulate very briefly, Christians appropriated the Jewish story as their own, expected Jews to follow them, and when they didn't, Christian resentment became vicious and often violent. One good example, and there are many, is Martin Luther. He had hopes the Jews might join him and his reformation. But when they didn't, he turned on them with intense antagonism expressed in his infamous work *On the Jews and Their Lies*, calling for hatred and even violence against Jews. The Nazis drew upon Luther's work in forming their own antisemitic propaganda. Had Luther attacked any other minority group the way he attacked Jews, there would be calls to tear down his statues and erase his name from history. But somehow Christianity does not find even this virulent level of antisemitism worth mentioning except perhaps as a footnote to his biography. In my experience very few Christians are even aware of this side of Luther.

There is a striking parallel in the life of Muhammad. As we have already seen, at first Muhammad wanted to engage the Jews peacefully. He admired their tradition, and even incorporated some Jewish practices, notably the *qibla* and Ashura mentioned above. He saw himself as a prophet of monotheism in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophets of old, and expected the Jews to accept him as such. But Jews felt no need for an additional prophet and did not accept his offer. That is when he turned violently against them.

We already know from Christian history how deep such a hatred can become, and the same pattern played out in Islam, with greatly varying levels of intensity. According to the Arabic biographies, during Muhammad's own time it was particularly bad. It has fluctuated ever since. Now, with the establishment of an independent Jewish state within the heart of the Muslim world, it is as bad as ever.

The Christian and Islamic stories shed light on each other. Christianity and Islam both owe their existence to Judaism. In each, the story of the Jewish people is a core part of its narrative and its sacred canon. Christians have incorporated the Jewish scriptures into their own Bible. The Qur'an also recounts in detail the Jewish story as recorded in those scriptures. Moses

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<sup>56</sup> C. Gourgey, "[The Moral Failure of Christian Theology](#)," *Judeochristianity.org*, April 2023.

is by far the figure most mentioned in the Qur'an, more than Muhammad or any other prophet. Without the Jewish story the Qur'an would hardly exist.

The continued existence of Jews and Judaism thus poses a problem for both later religions. For Christianity, the persistence of Judaism as a legitimate path to God put into question the need for Christ's sacrifice: if one can find divine acceptance and forgiveness of sins without Christ, then Christ died for nothing. Therefore Christianity had to delegitimize Judaism, which led eventually to the dehumanization of Jews.

In Islam it was similar. The persistence of Judaism as a great monotheism but without Muhammad put into question Muhammad's prophetic vocation. So Judaism too had to be delegitimized. And as happened with Christianity, in the most extreme forms of Islam, which we see today especially in Palestinian and Iranian culture, Jews had to be demonized and dehumanized. As the Hamas charter says, "Israel, Judaism and Jews challenge Islam," and that challenge calls for a radical solution.

Both Christianity and Islam have, in essence, said to Jews: Your story is our story now, and we are more faithful custodians of it than you. In both unreformed Christianity and unreformed Islam we find this dynamic: the Jews rejected the true new messenger of their faith – Jesus in Christianity and Muhammad in Islam – and so set themselves up in opposition to God. The rejection of God's messenger puts Jews on the side of evil, and makes persecuting them a meritorious act in the sight of God. And so the young terrorist could actually believe he was doing God's will by killing Jews and bragging to his parents about it, making his parents proud.

Muslim attitudes toward Jews, while for the most part negative, were not always this extreme. While Islam did consider Jews poor interpreters of their own scriptures and falling away from the truth, it did not usually see Jews as carriers of metaphysical evil. Some scholars believe this changed during the nineteenth century, largely due to Christian influence. Thus leading into our own time, Muslim antisemitism seems largely to have followed the Christian pattern.

And so this is how the pattern has worked, in both Christianity and Islam:

- There is a new revelation, based upon that given to the Jews.
- Jews do not accept this new revelation.
- Jews have always turned away from the truth. They even admit it in their own scriptures.
- Their own prophets condemned them, so they killed their own prophets.<sup>57</sup> They are faithless, devious, and treacherous.
- Therefore God has rejected them.
- And since rejected by God, they are less than fully human. It is meritorious to reject what God rejects, to hate what God hates, and to act out that hatred.

This is the classic dynamic in Christian antisemitism, and it operates just as forcefully in the conservative forms of Islam practiced by Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and in many parts of the Muslim world with strong anti-Jewish attitudes. Unfortunately, it is very widespread, so much so that it needs to be called out as a serious issue.

We can see this dynamic, from divine rejection to dehumanization, reflected even in the Qur'an. Here are just a few Qur'anic references concerning Jews:

They say, "Our hearts are the wrappings (which preserve Allah's Word: we need no more)." Nay, Allah's curse is on them for their blasphemy: Little is it they believe.<sup>58</sup>

The Jews say: "Allah's hand is tied up." Be their hands tied up and be they accursed for the (blasphemy) they utter.<sup>59</sup>

Shame is pitched over them (Like a tent) wherever they are found, except when under a covenant (of protection) from Allah and from men; they draw on themselves wrath from Allah, and pitched over them is (the tent of) destitution.

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<sup>57</sup> In the New Testament: Luke 11:47, Acts 7:51-52, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15; in the Qur'an: 2:61, 2:87, 2:91, 3:21, 3:112, 3:181, 3:183, 4:155, 5:70.

<sup>58</sup> Qur'an 2:88.

<sup>59</sup> Qur'an 5:64.

This because they rejected the Signs of Allah, and slew the prophets in defiance of right; this because they rebelled and transgressed beyond bounds.<sup>60</sup>

Say: “O people of the Book! Do ye disapprove of us for no other reason than that we believe in Allah, and the revelation that hath come to us and that which came before (us), and (perhaps) that most of you are rebellious and disobedient?” Say: “Shall I point out to you something much worse than this, (as judged) by the treatment it received from Allah? those who incurred the curse of Allah and His wrath, those of whom some He transformed into apes and swine, those who worshipped evil; — these are (many times) worse in rank, and far more astray from the even path!”<sup>61</sup>

In fairness it should be noted that the Qur’an also contains a few positive references about Jews, but you will never hear those quoted in Friday sermons. In contrast, references to Qur’an 5:60 are very common, with Jews even today referred to as “apes and pigs.” This from a Hamas cleric’s Friday sermon in Gaza is typical:

According to the tradition, [the Jews] killed 70 of the Israelite prophets in one hour during the daytime, and they did not even close their markets.... [Allah] transformed them into filthy, ugly animals like apes and pigs because of the injustice and evil they had brought about.... Oh Allah, bring annihilation upon the Jews... Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews.<sup>62</sup>

Note once again that the target is not just Israelis but Jews.

We’ve spoken above about “unreformed” Christianity and Islam. Christianity did reform – partially. Not the great “Reformation” begun by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century – in some important ways, and certainly in relation to Jews, that “reformation” represented a giant step backward. The true Christian reformation happened after the Holocaust, when many Christians’ consciences were shaken by the realization of the great extent to which Christian antisemitism contributed to that catastrophe. To be sure, that reform process never completed, but it was a big step forward. Islam, however, has not reformed beyond the efforts of isolated individuals sincerely working to define a more humane and inclusive form

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<sup>60</sup> Qur’an 3:112.

<sup>61</sup> Qur’an 5:59-60.

<sup>62</sup> [“Hamas Official Sheikh Hamad Al-Regeb Refers to Jews as ‘Brothers of Apes and Pigs,’”](#) *Middle East Media Research Institute*, April 7, 2023.

of their faith. Such ideals have yet to be adopted in large segments of the Muslim world, and so Jews remain demonized in the eyes of millions of Muslims. And so the mass demonstrations of Muslims around the world supporting and celebrating the appalling atrocities Hamas committed against Jewish civilians should not come as a total surprise.

### **Today: Implications for the War in Gaza**

Before ending it is important to call out some nefarious uses of language serving to fuel the conflict. Some are defending Hamas violence by calling it “resistance.” “What do you expect?” they say, “This is what resistance looks like.” Resistance to what? That is rarely stated explicitly; the hearer is expected to fill in the blank. One might think, “resistance to the occupation.” Occupation of what? Hamas plays a nasty word game with this word.

Israel did occupy Gaza – two decades ago. Israel totally withdrew from Gaza in 2005, clearing the way for Hamas to turn Gaza into a terrorist base. And yet some still call Gaza an “open-air prison.” This rhetoric might refer to the blockade, which was made necessary by Hamas continuing to import materials for war, and which has not been very successful. The situation is unfortunate, and of course an end to the blockade is desirable. That could come about if Hamas would cease using its imports for its aggression against the Israeli civilian population.

The current conflict has uncovered the extent of Hamas’s diversion of badly needed resources to its war effort. Case in point: before the first ceasefire, Hamas rocket fire from Gaza diminished to barely a trickle. The ceasefire was called to allow humanitarian aid to come in, but right afterward the rocket fire resumed full force. So where did all that needed “humanitarian aid” go? Hamas also built an enormous and highly expensive network of tunnels large enough to drive vehicles through, with full electricity and elevators. How might the lives of Gazans be different today if all that money and material had been devoted to building a functioning society instead of hating Jews?

So does “occupation” refer to the West Bank? The West Bank is still occupied, which is unfortunate. But ending the occupation now, with Hamas still intact and the antisemitic hatred it represents shared by many in the Palestinian population, would inevitably mean another state controlled by

Hamas penetrating into Israel's heartland, right next to its major cities. It would be a death sentence for Israel.

I fervently hope that someday the occupation of the West Bank will end. Before October 7 I even supported taking steps to end the occupation. But current conditions make that impossible for now and the foreseeable future. No country, not even Israel, can be forced to sign its own death warrant.

Notice, however, that Hamas never even mentions the West Bank. That is not what Hamas means by "occupation." Hamas *wants* people to be confused when they hear that word. Both in its charter and its current rhetoric, by "occupation" Hamas means *the entirety of the State of Israel*. Hamas calls *all* of Israel "occupied territory" and *all* Jewish inhabitants of Israel, including the babies they killed on October 7, "settlers" and "colonialists." Were the occupation of the West Bank to end tomorrow, it would make no difference. Hamas's program is nothing less than a genocidal war against the State of Israel. The term "occupation" should not be used to disguise that fact.

Hamas leader Khalid Mashaal has made this very clear: "Palestine – from the [Jordan] river to the [Mediterranean] sea, from the north to the south [i.e. all of Israel] – is our land. There will be no surrender of even the smallest piece of it. It is unthinkable that we would recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation of it."<sup>63</sup> This is what the chant "Palestine will be free, from the river to the sea" really means. This is what the slogan means when Rashida Tlaib promotes it, and when campus demonstrators shout it. By adopting this Hamas slogan as their own, they are advocating the destruction of Israel and the mass murder of Jews.

Another word frequently misused with malicious deception is "genocide." Israel is accused on many sides of committing "genocide" in Gaza. This is a demonstrable lie. It is tragically true that every war produces civilian casualties, especially now when Hamas intentionally puts civilians in harm's way, but that does not amount to genocide. Genocide means an intentional effort to wipe out an *entire* population. A genocidal army does not make attempts to evacuate civilians from the most dangerous areas, does not mark out safe passage corridors, nor does it warn civilians where

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<sup>63</sup> Ron Prozor, "[Statements made by Hamas leader against Israel](#)," United Nations, December 12, 2002.

they intend to strike, thus giving up the advantage of surprise. The Israel army has done all of this.<sup>64</sup>

Hamas, on the other hand, intentionally targets civilians, sparing no one including women and children, even systematically using rape as a weapon of war, trying to wipe out or take as hostage as much of the Jewish population as it can. That is truly genocidal. And Hamas even admits its intention is genocidal. A Hamas official warned: “We will repeat the October 7 attack, time and again, until Israel is annihilated” and stated the following:

Israel is a country that has no place on our land. We must remove that country, because it constitutes a security, military, and political catastrophe to the Arab and Islamic nation, and must be finished. We are not ashamed to say this, with full force.

We must teach Israel a lesson, and we will do this again and again. The Al-Aqsa Flood [the October 7 massacre] is just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth, because we have the determination, the resolve, and the capabilities to fight. Will we have to pay a price? Yes, and we are ready to pay it. We are called a nation of martyrs, and we are proud to sacrifice martyrs.<sup>65</sup>

The interview from which these excerpts were taken continues:

Hamad: The occupation must come to an end.

News anchor: Occupation where? In the Gaza Strip?

Hamad: No, I am talking about all the Palestinian lands.

“From the river to the sea”: the annihilation of Israel and the massacre of its Jews – in other words, genocide – is and always has been Hamas’s primary agenda. Hamas and its supporters never talk about “57 years of occupation,” that is, since 1967 and the Six-Day War, when Israel’s occupation of the West Bank began. It is always “75 years of occupation,” since 1948, Israel’s founding. Hamas and its allies are continuing to fight the war of 1948, whose aim was the elimination of Israel. So when

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<sup>64</sup> Emanuel Fabian, [“Thousands of Gazans Use Humanitarian Corridor to Move South as IDF Presses Offensive,”](#) *Times of Israel*, November 8, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> [“Hamas Official Ghazi Hamad: We Will Repeat the October 7 Attack, Time and Again, Until Israel Is Annihilated; We Are Victims – Everything We Do Is Justified,”](#) *Middle East Media Research Institute*, November 1, 2023.

demonstrators shout about “ending the occupation,” understand what that really means.

## **An Omen for the Future**

One critically important topic, which merits a separate study at least this long, is the indoctrination of Middle Eastern children in the hatred of Jews.

For far too long the pervasive Middle Eastern qualification of Jews as murderers and bloodsuckers was dismissed in the West as an extreme view expressed by radical fringe groups. But it is not.

All over the Middle East, hatred for Jews and Zionists can be found in textbooks for children as young as 3, complete with illustrations of Jews with monster-like qualities. Mainstream educational television programs are consistently anti-Semitic. In songs, books, newspaper articles, and blogs, Jews are variously compared to pigs, donkeys, rats, and cockroaches, and also to vampires and a host of other imaginary creatures.

Consider this infamous dialogue between a 3-year-old and a television presenter, eight years before Mr. Morsi’s remarks.

Presenter: “Do you like Jews?”

3-year-old: “No.”

“Why don’t you like them?”

“Jews are apes and pigs.”

“Who said this?”

“Our God.”

“Where did he say this?”

“In the [Qur’an].”

The presenter responds approvingly: “No [parents] could wish for Allah to give them a more believing girl than she ... May Allah bless her, her father, and mother.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ayaan Hirsi Ali, [“Why Middle East Muslims Are Taught to Hate Jews,”](#) *Christian Science Monitor*, January 24, 2013.

This type of incitement not only against Israel but also Jews has been typical of Palestinian media and school textbooks for decades. Attempts to put a stop to it have proved futile. In essence, Palestinian society inculcates in its children a hatred of Jews and a love of martyrdom that is bound to create future terrorists. No resolution of the conflict, including a two-state solution, can be possible as long as this continues.

Here are a few examples of how Palestinian children are educated in UNRWA schools:

Students to be punished for not directly connecting Judaism with murder: Antisemitic grading instructions tell teachers to deduct grading points from students who fail to *“tie the perpetration of Zionist massacres to Jewish religious thought.”*<sup>67</sup>

Jews are associated with sexual harassment: “A Muslim woman sat next to a Jewish goldsmith in the Banu Qaynuqa market. The goldsmith tied the edge of her garment to her back without her noticing. When she got up, she revealed her private parts. The Jews then laughed at her, she screamed, and a Muslim man jumped on the goldsmith and killed him. The Jews then attacked the Muslim and killed him.”<sup>68</sup>

Teachers are instructed to ask students “Why do the Jews perpetrate massacres?”... By referring to “the Jews” in general, as well as phrasing the question using the present tense, the teacher guide possibly implies that perpetrating massacres is a trait and a habit of Jews as a collective.<sup>69</sup>

Jews control money, media, and politics.<sup>70</sup>

Terrorists are glorified as role models: Dalal al-Mughrabi, the perpetrator of the 1978 Coastal Road massacre, is celebrated in a detailed 10-page Arabic reading comprehension which exalts her and the terror act as *“heroism”* while the massacre is referred to as *“immortal”* in the *“hearts and minds”* of Palestinians. Fifth-graders are invited to follow in her footsteps and view her as a role model.<sup>71</sup>

Those who die as martyrs fighting infidels will go to paradise and will be rewarded: Students are taught in an explanation of a Qur’anic surah and hadith that those who die as martyrs (*shuhada’*) fighting infidels (Christians, Jews, polytheists) will go to paradise where Allah will raise their status. No

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<sup>67</sup> [UNRWA Education: Textbooks and Terror](#), IMPACT-se, November 2023, 101.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

essential historical context or alternative explanation about infidels is given to the students.<sup>72</sup>

Jihad for the liberation of Palestine is a private obligation for every Muslim: Jihad “for the liberation of Palestine” is presented as a “private obligation for every Muslim” in a subsection discussing practices and duties obligated by Sharia law. In the 2019 and 2018 editions, the passage stated that jihad for Allah was only a private obligation for every Muslim, and only in 2020 this was specified to liberating Palestine [i.e. all of Israel].<sup>73</sup>

Martyrdom as an essential part of Jihad: Martyrdom is associated with battle and jihad in a chapter devoted entirely to these topics, glorifying them as an essential part of Islamic faith. The meaning of jihad as expressed in this chapter is warfare; six verses are selected from the Qur’an to support this view. No other interpretation of the meaning of jihad is offered. A concluding exercise encouraging students to discuss goals of jihad and the wonders of martyrs was replaced in the 2020 edition, making it more specific to Palestine, and indirectly – to the conflict with Israel.<sup>74</sup>

Martyrdom in battle with Israel brings honor, “the most noble” type of self-sacrifice: ...students are taught to see a connection between examples of men willing to sacrifice their lives in battle as manifested in the Prophet’s era and those sacrifices made in modern times by Palestinians. The text also emphasizes that self-sacrifice brings honor, power and promises entrance to paradise for those who choose this path, while those who do not are considered weak and humiliated.<sup>75</sup>

To these examples much more could be added.

### **After All This, What Next?**

Hamas is not a victim; it is an agent. Gaza is already a de facto state, with its own government and army. Yet Hamas has successfully sold its narrative of victimhood to much of the world. As long as that continues, and as long as Palestinian children are trained to reject peaceful coexistence, the conflict will have no end.

Hamas also does not act alone. It has powerful allies, notably Hezbollah to the north and its sponsor Iran. And now even the Houthis in Yemen have

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 115.

joined the attacks on Israel.<sup>76</sup> Thus Israel is completely surrounded. People see on television scenes of destruction in Gaza. What they don't see is Hezbollah devastating Israel's north, making Israel's northern population centers unlivable. What they don't see are the 200,000 Israelis displaced from towns in the north because of heavy rocket fire on their homes.<sup>77</sup> And what they also don't see are videos of what happened to the over 1,200 victims of Hamas on October 7, including women and children.

Israel is not committing "genocide" against Palestinians. It is fighting for its existence. Hamas and Hezbollah, with Iran's blessing, have made it clear that if they are not stopped, what they have in mind for Israel is nothing less than a second Holocaust. And Hezbollah now has enough firepower to decimate every major city in Israel.

To be sure there are also hardliners in Israel, but they are not genocidists. And Palestinian intransigence and terrorism have only strengthened them. As long as the forces now arrayed against Israel pose a mortal threat, there is no credible argument against opposition to a Palestinian state at this time. Hopefully that will change, someday.

The evidence presented here should make it clear that Islamic antisemitism has been and continues to be a powerful force driving this conflict. It has succeeded in blocking a two-state conflict resolution on several occasions.<sup>78</sup> Yet hope may rest in the efforts of people of good will on both sides – and there are many in both the Muslim and Jewish communities. Each community needs to recognize and value the humanity of the other. And at least in principle, it must be granted that both Jews and Palestinians have a right to be where they are and to have their national aspirations respected. Even though a Palestinian state may not be a viable prospect under present conditions, at least *in principle* each side must recognize the right of the other to exist. This, coupled with true religious reform, may make a two-state solution possible in the future. But it would have to be in an entirely different world from the one we are living in now. May we only survive until such a world becomes possible.

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<sup>76</sup> Gabby Sobelman, Aaron Boxerman, Ronen Bergman, Lara Jakes and Erin Mendell, "[Houthis Launch Deadly Drone Strike on Tel Aviv, Evading Israel's Defenses](#)," New York Times, July 19, 2024.

<sup>77</sup> TOI Staff, "[About 200,000 Israelis Internally Displaced amid Ongoing Gaza War, Tensions in North](#)," *Times of Israel*, October 22, 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Notably in 1937, 1947, and 2000.

## **Postscript: The War with Iran**

People around the world are understandably on edge since Israel and Iran are once again at war, this time with the open involvement of the United States. A strong desire exists to understand the roots of this conflict and its underlying mutual hatred. Iran and the United States have a fraught relationship. One can point to the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, in a coup orchestrated by the United States and British intelligence after Iran nationalized its oil industry, and to Mossadegh's replacement by the Shah's repressive regime. No doubt this is an important factor; the US action was horrid and indefensible. But that alone is insufficient to explain the current conflict and specifically Israel's involvement in the war with Iran.

From the foregoing article we can see that Islamic anti-Jewish sentiment is not an exclusively modern phenomenon, but has existed ever since Islam's beginnings. As a supposed exception some mention the so-called "golden age" in Medieval Spain, when Muslims, Christians, and Jews were said to have lived in flourishing harmony. This era has been greatly romanticized. Muslims were relatively content with Jews as long as the latter knew their place as second-class citizens and were treated accordingly. But what the Muslim world could never abide was a sovereign Jewish presence anywhere in its midst.

From the beginning, even in Islamic sources as we have seen, Jews were cast as enemies of the Prophet, and that feeling never completely disappeared. That Jews should govern a country anywhere within the Muslim world, especially with Muslim subjects, was intolerable to the Muslim world as a whole. There have always been exceptions, as there are today groups of Israelis and Palestinians working together for peace, but these were never sufficiently numerous to counter the general trend.

Some would like to believe that the conflict has only to do with the establishment of the State of Israel, but that is wishful thinking. Clearly the issue is animosity toward Jews in general, as Jews outside Israel are always subject to attack at times in which the conflict flares. The Farhud, a bloody attack on Baghdad's Jewish community, took place in 1941, years before the State of Israel was established. Other similar incidents also occurred. The origins of Islamic antisemitism are not much different from the origins of Christian antisemitism. Both are ancient, rooted in the desire

to co-opt the Jewish story as their own, and in the perception of Jews as the enemy of their revered leader.

For years Iran has been agitating for a war against the Jews. In 2006 it sponsored a widely publicized Holocaust denial conference – again, more anti-Jewish than anti-Israeli. Iran has also advocated and predicted open conflict with Israel. In Tehran Iranian authorities erected a “doomsday clock” counting down the time until Israel’s destruction, which now deceased Iranian leader Ali Khamenei often declared certain in accordance with God’s will. And in October 2023 Iran, through its proxies Hamas and Hezbollah, launched a clearly genocidal attack against Israel’s civilian population. (It was the Muslim side, not Israel, who had the true genocidal intent.) The current conflict with Iran has a context, and cannot be understood in isolation from it.

Once again, as noted in the body of this article, there have been notable exceptions in which Muslims and Jews have worked together to find peaceful coexistence and harmony. One must always be careful never to overgeneralize. Nevertheless, this does not negate the existence of distinct anti-Jewish tendencies within Islam itself. The Middle Eastern conflict will never be resolved until this fact is recognized and confronted. Unfortunately the prospects for this do not, at least at the present time, appear promising.

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