

by Martin Kramer

It's not just about Israel, but neither is it the nature of Islam.

# The Salience of Islamic Antisemitism

*Institute of Jewish Affairs Reports*

In the Institute of Jewish Affairs' *Anti-Semitism World Report* for 1992, it was determined that "Jewish security throughout the world is perhaps affected most seriously of all by Islamic fundamentalist groups." Yet at the same time, the report admitted that "this is an area about which there is more speculation than hard evidence." Since then, the bombing of the AMIA building in Argentina in July 1994 has lifted any lingering doubt as to where the most serious threat to Jewish security lies. Hard evidence is rapidly replacing speculation. It is evidence we can no longer ignore or deny.

Taking a hard look at hard evidence and assessing it soberly means breaking the long habit of emphasizing only the tolerance of Islam—a tolerance which drew so many Jewish scholars to study it in the first place. Islam today is not what it was, and nostalgia is not a very practical sentiment. Today there is Islamic antisemitism—a belief among many Muslims that Jews everywhere, in league with Israel, are behind a sinister plot to destroy Islam. Some of these Muslims believe the battleground is anywhere on the globe where Jews are organized to assist and aid in this plot. As I wrote last year in my *Commentary* [article](#), "The Jihad Against the Jews," this antisemitism seems to me so widespread and potentially violent that it could eclipse all other forms of antisemitism over the next decade.

It is not my intention here to repeat my article in *Commentary*. Nor is it possible, in this short space, to cover the entire panorama of antisemitism in the Islamic world, or even pursue any single case in depth. What I want to do is offer my own answers to three questions which I think should command our special attention, and which relate to the overall salience of Islamic antisemitism. What are the origins of this antisemitism? How widespread is it now? Is it likely to grow in the future?

## What Are the Origins of Islamic Antisemitism?

The question poses many of the same analytical dilemmas posed by antisemitism elsewhere. How much of it is the legacy of religious prejudice? How much is the product of modern theories of nation and race? How much is root in contemporary society, economics and politics? As any historian will tell you, it is extremely difficult to establish intellectual origins. We can

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only look at contemporary ideas and try to draw lines to earlier ideas, knowing that none of these lines is straight.

The two most common answers—which do draw straight lines—locate the source of this antisemitism either in the essence of Islam, or in the creation of Israel. Let me begin with the first: the idea that Islamic prejudice against the Jews goes back fourteen centuries, that Islamic theology is ipso facto antisemitic. At the time of the Prophet Muhammad, relates the Qur'an, some Jews engaged in treachery against him. This is recorded in the Qur'an as God's word. Speaking to Jewish audiences, I am often asked by those who have read certain passages of the Qur'an whether Jew-hatred is not endemic to Islam. Is it possible for any Muslim who goes back to these sources to read them as anything other than an indictment of Jewish treachery? There is a view that Islam in its very essence is antisemitic, and that the roots of the antisemitism we see today are authentically Islamic.

This answer touches on some truths, yet it misses many others. One is that the Islamic tradition did not hold up those Jews who practiced treachery against Muhammad as archetypes—as the embodiment of Jews in all times and places. This makes for a striking contrast with a certain Christian concept of the eternal Jew, who forever bears the mark of the betrayer of Jesus. The Qur'an also includes certain verses which attest to the Prophet's amicable relations with some Jews, and while religious supremacism always coloured the traditional Islamic view of the Jews, it also coloured the Islamic view of Christians and all other non-Muslims. In the Islamic tradition, the Jews are regarded as members of a legitimate community of believers in God, "people of the Book," legally entitled to sufferance. The overall record of Islamic civilization's tolerance of Jews is not a bad one, especially when compared with the record of Christendom in most periods.

Does that mean that today's Islamic antisemitism has no grounding of Islam? No; there is no doubt whatsoever that the Islamic tradition provides sources on which Islamic antisemitism now feeds. Here is the mentor of Hizbullah in Lebanon, Ayatollah Fadlallah, pointing to the Qur'an as just such a source: "In the vocabulary of the Qur'an," he says, "Islamists have much of what they need to awaken the consciousness of Muslims, relying on the literal text of the Qur'an, because the Qur'an speaks about the Jews in a negative way, concerning both their historical conduct and future schemes."

Today's Muslim antisemites make very effective use of the Qur'an and Tradition of the Prophet. But it is also a selective and distorting use. For Muslims to arrive at the idea of an eternal Jew in Islam, for them to portray the Jews as "enemies of God," some additional influence must be at work.

Perhaps it is the creation and policies of Israel? Here we come to the second straight line, sometimes drawn from Israel to anti-Zionism, which may become blurred at the edges into antisemitism. Akbar Ahmed has put it this way:

The loss of land for the Palestinians and the loss of the holy places in Jerusalem are viewed with a sense of injustice and anger among Muslims. In the rhetoric of confrontation, many themselves blur the distinctions between anti-Judaism, antisemitism, and anti-Zionism. Such Muslims thus make the

mistake they accuse others of making about them—seeing all Jews as homogenous, monolithic and threatening.

This is obviously true as far as it goes. There is a sense of injustice and loss which runs deep, and in which Israel today occupies a prime place. There is little doubt that in some contexts, Muslims really mean to condemn the Israelis for their polices when they condemn the Jews for their perfidy.

But what Akbar Ahmed calls a rhetorical mistake is really much more than that. It has become a conscious and deliberate ideological affirmation, even a tenet of belief. The approach of a growing number of Islamists has been to see Israel as a symptom of some larger conspiracy against them—either Western, or Jewish, or a sinister combination of the two. Many Islamists today do not look at Israel or its policies as their irritant. They look beyond, either to America, symbol today of the power of the West, or to the Jews, dispersed throughout the West, where they exercise a malignant influence. These are deemed be the real forces driving history.

When this logic is taken to its most extreme Islamist conclusion, it will attribute almost any misfortune to the secret machinations of the Jews everywhere. They become the secret force behind Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and the fall of the Muslim-owned Bank of Credit and Commerce International. Wherever they may be, the Jews are linked together in a sinister plot, not merely to maintain the state of Israel, but to undermine and eradicate Islam. Rashid al-Ghannushi, the Tunisian Islamist who now lives in London, has spoken of "a Jewish-American plan encompassing the entire region, which would cleanse it of all resistance and open it to Jewish hegemony from Marrakesh to Kazakhstan." Note that Ghannushi did not speak of an Israeli-American plan. In this view, the state of Israel is simply one arm of a wider Jewish conspiracy.

Listen to Ayatollah Fadlallah, the oracle of Hizbullah in Lebanon, who puts it even better. There is, he says, "a world Jewish movement working to deprive Islam of its positions of actual power—spiritually, on the question of Jerusalem; geographically, on the question of Palestine; politically, by bringing pressures to block Islam's movement at more than one place; and economically, in an effort to control Islam's economic potential and resources, in production and consumption."

The motive of the Jews, says Fadlallah, is that they "want to be a world superpower." Israel is intended to be "the nucleus for spreading their economic and cultural domination." Behind this effort there is no people or community of belief, but what Fadlallah darkly calls "a group." He points out that this is "not merely a group that established a state at the expense of a people. It is a group which wants to establish Jewish culture at the expense of Islamic culture." At stake here, then, is not Palestinian land or even Jerusalem, but Islamic culture itself. Here is a view of Muslim and Jew locked in a total confrontation which will continue until one side completely subjugates the other.

It would appear, therefore, that for Muslims to portray the Jew as the eternal Jew, for Muslims to portray the Jew as the arch conspirator, there must be more at work than Islamic tradition and Israeli policy. If these themes seem distressingly familiar, it is quite likely because they are borrowings from the

canon of Western religious and racial antisemitism. The antisemitism we see today in the Islamic world owes a crucial debt to the antisemitism of the West. Like so much else in Islamist thought, it is derivative of Western ideological excess. How did it reach Muslims? I think it is highly relevant that many Islamist thinkers of the present generation have spent time in the West, collecting advanced degrees at the universities of London and Paris. There they seem to have absorbed the antisemitism of the extreme Left and Right, which they now retail as a comprehensive indictment of the Jews extending far beyond anti-Zionism.

In this indictment, which purports to be the authentic voice of Islam, all manner of themes and sources jostle one another. Verses from the Qur'an mingle with quotations from the Protocols. The role of the Jews in Arabia of the seventh century is compared with the alleged international power of the Jews in the late twentieth. In this collapsing of sources and history, another distinction—between anti-Zionism and antisemitism—is deliberately lost.

Islamism, then, like the foreign ideologies whose forms it mimics, requires the existence of a conspiracy. The existence of this conspiracy is necessary if Muslims are to find some external reason for Muslim weakness and dependence. In the foreign ideologies Islamism mimics—which are also antisemitic—Jews fill the role of conspirator, sapping societies of their vitality. Islamism looks at the tradition of Islam and the policies of Israel through this ideological prism—and sees a world Jewish conspiracy. Without this ideological prism, there can be no Islamic antisemitism. Islam is not inherently antisemitic. But Islamism is, and anyone viewing the world through its prism will inevitably see conspiring Jews.

The AMIA bombing is the disturbing evidence that we are no longer dealing here with a rhetorical flourish or ideological daydreaming. I believe that this bombing was meant to deter the State of Israel from taking certain actions in Lebanon. But only someone persuaded of the existence of a world Jewish conspiracy against Islam could consider achieving this purpose by killing Argentine Jews at random.

On the question of origins, then, Islamic antisemitism is not simply a continuation of tradition or a response to injustice. Like other antisemitism, it has its origins in the anti-rational ideologies of modern Europe, which have now infected the Islamic world. If this is so, then neither a break with tradition, nor a diminishing of the injustice, will stop it. It exists above all because it is needed to complete an irrational logic.

### **How Widespread is Islamic Antisemitism?**

Let me quote a brief passage I read not long ago by the French scholar Olivier Roy, who has written an important book on political Islam and did his earlier work on its development in Afghanistan. He writes of what he calls the evolution of the Afghan's image of the Jew: "Before the war in Afghanistan, the Pakhtun tribes boasted of being descended from a lost tribe of Israel; during the war, many traditionalist mullahs could be heard extolling the virtues of the Torah (in opposition, of course, to the atheist communists), but today many Afghan neofundamentalists harp on the Zionist plot."

If, in the highlands of Afghanistan, the Pakhtuns are having second thoughts about their descent, I think this speaks volumes about the extent of antisemitism in Muslim lands, and particularly its dissemination by Islamists. The existence of a Jewish conspiracy against Islam is integral to the Islamist ideology, not tangential. Everywhere that ideology is preached, everywhere it is embraced, the conspiracy of the Jews is included in the package, which is to say that we should hardly be surprised when it surfaces even in the most unlikely places in Asia and Africa.

But more importantly, it now exists in the West itself, among Muslim immigrants and visitors who arrive in ever greater numbers to Britain, France, the US, Argentina, and Australia—precisely the centres of the Jewish Diaspora. Today virtually every trend in Islamic thought and activism is represented in the West, including the most militant forms of Islamism. The UK provides an interesting example. It is home to several organizations inspired by the Islamic Republic of Iran; to the Palestinian Hamas, which publishes its flagship magazine in London; and to the Hizb al-Tahrir or "Liberation Party," clandestine in the Middle East but highly visible on British campuses. This is the kind of volatile mix one would be hard-pressed to find in any single Middle Eastern country, and the mix of antisemitic materials disseminated by these groups is just as varied.

It is still very difficult to measure the significance of these groups and their materials. It may be impossible to predict how and when threats might become deeds. The work of analysis has to be done in every instance on the local level, by long-time watchers of the local Islamist scene. My point is that there is no place in the West without an Islamist scene, and no Islamist scene in the West that does not deserve close watching.

### **Is Islamic Antisemitism Likely to Grow in the Future?**

I do not have a complete answer, but let me offer some insights that might contribute to an answer.

As the Arab-Israeli peace process evolves, the Islamic world is becoming immersed in an unprecedented debate on the Jews, and on whether Muslims can or should ever live in peace with them. The outcome of this debate is impossible to predict. In the course of it we will overhear words which will encourage us, and words which will alarm us; the Islamists in particular will say more and more to alarm us, because their very world view is at stake.

The Islamists now argue that any peace with Israel will subject the Muslim world to complete Jewish domination. Even were Israel to permit the creation of a Palestinian state, even were it to make concessions on Jerusalem, it would still exist as a tool of cultural leverage against Islam. Any "normalization" provisions of any peace agreement will mean a massive influx of Jews into Islamic countries—as diplomats, journalists, businessmen, and tourists. Their objective, say the Islamists, will be to dominate and corrupt the Islamic world. Here is Ibrahim Ghawsha, the Hamas spokesman:

God forbid, if by means of signing the peace accords the Arabs and Israelis reach a compromise and they implement their plan

for autonomy, Arab economies will collapse because they will not be able to compete with the Israelis' modern industries. Thus, Israel will dominate the region like Japan dominates southeast Asia, and the Arabs will all become employees of the Jews.

This scenario of the Jew as boss of Islam is just the beginning. We can expect that if the peace process makes further progress, Islamists will paint darker and darker scenarios, where the theme of Jewish domination replaces that of Israeli usurpation.

But at the same time, we will hear other voices which will encourage us. Over the past month, Islamists have been battling against a fatwa, a legal edict, by the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz. The fatwa permits negotiation of peace with Israel, and permits Muslims to visit Jerusalem even now. There is no space here to go into the intricacies of this debate, and Bin Baz's own circumlocutions, but at one point he did say this:

The Prophet made absolute peace with the Jews of Medina when he went there an immigrant. That did not entail any love for them or amiability with them. But the Prophet dealt with them, buying from them, talking to them, calling them to God and Islam. When he died, his shield was mortgaged to a Jew, for he had mortgaged it to buy food for his family.

We have here an explicit endorsement of normal relations with Jews, of a kind no Muslim cleric would have made a few years ago.

So the Islamic debate is underway, and on the whole, we must welcome the fact that it is taking place at all. But I would estimate that as it intensifies, Islamists will be pushed to new extremes—certainly rhetorical and, for all we know, operational as well. AMIA, I believe, will prove to be a rare event. I am not as certain it will prove to be unique.

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