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Arabs and Jews: The Holocaust and its Aftermath

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French Enlightenment philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau once said that there are not just two sides to a story but four: your side, their side, the truth, and what really happened. In examining the history of Jews in Arab lands alongside their experience of persecution and protection, the two latter perspectives prove significantly more important than opposing narratives in assessing their implications on today's Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian tensions, especially in the context of the Israel-Hamas war. What really happened can provide lessons to learn from to uncover what has fostered the truth – truths driving the geopolitical, social, political, and religious tensions of our age; truths that warn of the ramifications and risks of radical leaders who weaponize religion for their own political gain.

The lasting effects of Nazi ideology on Arab-Israeli relations post-1948 underscore the imperative to critically address hateful propaganda and education in shaping Arab-Israeli tensions. While acknowledging the instances of Arab solidarity and protection of Jews during the Holocaust, we must also grapple with the more ominous aspects, including the collaboration with Nazi forces and the merging of antisemitic Nazi and Soviet propaganda with Islamist fundamentalism. This trifecta of ideologies plays a significant role in an existential struggle against Israel and Jews globally, jeopardising the peace and security of not only the Middle East, but the entirety of Western civilization.

Robert Satloff, author of *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach Into Arab Lands*, writes that 'though not lead actors in the anti-Jewish drama, they [Arabs] were, in a certain way, its Greek chorus.' Other Arabs, however, strived to save their Abrahamic brothers from the notorious rings of Nazism. Such history—*what really happened*—must be presented in order to learn from an unvarnished reality, despite the challenge and discomfort it may bring.

To properly assess the role played by Arabs and Muslims during the Holocaust, two critical factors must be considered: First, we must account for motivational factors. Satloff describes

the main attitude of the Arab world during the Holocaust era as ‘indifference,’ resulting in a prioritisation of political interests and survival that would ultimately shape its role during this period. Second, we must caution monolithing the Arab collective to avoid washing over rich historical and cultural particularities that can help understand and reshape Arab-Jewish dynamics. A hundred-year inaccessibility to indicative documents hinders the accurate evaluation and ranking of particular Arab countries as it concerns the treatment of their Jewish population during this period. We *can*, however, analyse the collective national aspirations among Arab countries, how leaders and individuals acted in various Arab countries and why, and most importantly, the lasting impact of Nazism across the Middle East.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: PERSECUTION AND PROTECTION

Assessing the role of Arabs and Muslims during the Holocaust requires an examination of the influence of Vichy and Italian presence in specific Middle Eastern regions. The Vichy occupation of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, coupled with Italian presence in Libya, introduced Nazism to the Arab population. In her book, *Uprooted*, Lyn Julius describes how Nazi antisemitism triggered an ‘identity crisis,’ reshaping the perception of Jews among many Muslims. Previously considered as inferior yet deserving of protection known as *dhimmis* or people of the book, Jews were now associated with conspiratorial power by the Nazis. Instead of Jew-hatred being directed downward, whereby Jews were viewed as the inferior religious group, it now punched upward under the Nazi conspiracy that Jews had ultimate power and sought world dominance; this fostered a belief that Jews represented both sides of an evil token.

The Muslim [Brotherhood](#), founded in Egypt by Hasan al-Bana in 1928, endeavoured to Islamize society through the promotion of religious law and social programs. [Al-Banna](#) worshipped Adolf Hitler and modelled his movement on Nazi ideology as he rose to prominence, translating Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” into the Arabic “My Jihad” and other antisemitic Nazi tabloids into Arabic while strategizing to eliminate any source in the way of his Islamization, or purification, mission. The Jews, of course, were that source. Al-Bana influenced the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood movement led by Haj Amin al-Husseyni and eventually, [Sayyid Qutb](#), the Egyptian writer who advocated jihad as an offensive war against all non-believers giving rise to the Islamist groups of our day including Hamas and Al-Qaeda. Some Muslims, untouched by the Brotherhood’s radicalism and Nazi ideology disavowed the antisemitic notions and rejected pseudo-scientific racial science, adhering to the Quranic citation of the Jewish people as *B’nai Israel*. Such recognition resulted in an acknowledgement of the Abrahamic connection between Jews and Muslims that would demand protection over Jewish brothers, as *dhimmis*.

But practical interests superseded ideology and religion, leading to pervasive antisemitism in the Middle East. As stated by Satloff, ‘the preoccupation of most Arabs was survival,’—the essential needs of finding food, water, and employment. Some individuals seized the opportunity presented by Nazi infiltration to exploit Jews for commercial gain. Those of the

upper and political echelons sought to challenge colonial rule and saw some Jews as collaborators with the colonialists, although displaying less interest in persecuting Jews for religion's sake. All the while, many Arabs perceived Hitler's ideology as a means to liberation.

Up until the 1930s, when Nazis sought to instigate an anti-colonial Arab uprising, Nazis considered Arabs just a level above Jews on the purity scale. Near Tunis, a German officer said to an Arab, 'Your time will come. We will finish with the Jews and then we will take care of you.' Indeed, in Morocco and Algeria, some Arabs were dispatched to desert concentration camps and drafted into forced labour as the Nazis lost Jewish manpower.

One prime example of lasting impact in Middle East dynamics occurred at a sinister [meeting](#) in 1941 between the Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Haj-Amin al Husseyni, and Adolf Hitler. Al-Husseyni expressed to Hitler that Arabs were Germany's 'natural friends' because they had the same enemies as Germany, namely the English, the Jews and the Communists. Just as the Jews and the allied powers thwarted the pursuit of *lebensraum* toward a pure German empire, they too hindered Arab nationalism. Thus, Arabs were 'prepared to cooperate with Germany with all their hearts.' Nazi support of the 1936 Arab Riots in British Mandate Palestine influenced the formation of the Ba'ath, the Arab Socialist Nationalist Party, which asserted the unity of all Arabic speaking people to form a singular Arab state in the Arabian Peninsula. In addition to pan-Arabism, the party's ideology aligned with Arab socialist, Arab nationalist, and anti-imperial interests. With the ultimate aim of unifying Palestine, Syria and Iraq, Mufti al-Husseyni sought the support of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Al-Futuwwa groups, originally called Nazi scouts modelled on the Nazi youth, popped up in Palestine and Iraq, as well as the student-formed religious-oriented Young Egypt Party that sought to fend off the British and influence Egyptian politics from the outside-in. In collaboration with Hitler, Husseyni widely disseminated anti-allied and anti-Jewish propaganda to the Arab world, alleging that a Jewish 'worldwide conspiracy' had sponsored Soviet Communism. His appeals for the expulsion and ethnic cleansing of Jews from Arab Lands and anywhere they were found eventually materialised in the aftermath of 1948; his plans for Nazi-like extermination camps in Palestine were, fortunately, never realised.

The Iraqi [Farhud](#) of 1941 (a massacre of several hundred Jews) exemplifies the merging of Husseini's initiatives, nationalist zeal, and anti-Jewish sentiment. This Nazi-inspired pogrom was led by Rashid Ali al-Kailani, who formed a pro-German government to fight British colonial influence in Iraq. Al-Husseini's propaganda efforts exceeded the scope of his political motivations. Antisemitic sentiment among the Arab public preceded the Mufti's conversation with Hitler: In 1930, the Egyptian-established Muslim Brotherhood had begun [receiving](#) financial and ideological assistance from Nazi Germany. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were [translated](#) into Arabic in 1930 and 1926, respectively. The importation of Nazi antisemitism made Jews an easy scapegoat that influenced publications such as a 1940 editorial in the Algerian newspaper *El-Balagh* that voiced the desire to expel Jews to 'a faraway desert' or 'desert' under 'rigorous international control;' that same year, rumours spread in Tunisia about the Jews debilitating the war effort

and kidnapping a Muslim girl. Predictably, the toxic blend of bigoted fabrications, hateful ideology, and propaganda [triggered](#) violent anti-Jewish riots in Iraq, Tunis, and Cairo among other Arab cities from 1941 through the 1950s and 60s, mirroring similar events on European streets.

Gad Sachar and Yehoshua Duweib, Jewish survivors of Vichy labour camps in Tunisia, [discussed](#) the impact of antisemitic propaganda on the public: Arabs goading, beyond ‘indifference’ or ‘just following orders.’ They [recall](#) Arab residents ‘mock[ing] and laugh[ing]’ as Germans herded up and forced Jews to march through Tunis. Testimonies of Jews like Harry Alexander, a survivor of a Vichy camp in Djelfa, shared how ‘orders’ of stripping Jews involved Arabs tying them to a post, and beating them naked, or burying Jews with their head in the sand while gleefully smiling appeared a guilty pleasure.

Husseini also encouraged Muslim soldiers to fight alongside the Vichy and Italian regimes upon their establishment in 1943. While ‘their direct military contribution was negligible, they furnished rolls upon rolls of propaganda film for the German war effort.’ Leo Löwenthal’s [The Prophets of Deceit](#) discusses how hate and facism can sweep into and dominate a society. A backdrop of domestic political turmoil, dire economic distress, and general disenchantment—coupled with widespread dissemination of factual distortion and conspiracy theories—established a fertile ground for the digestion of propaganda and the eventual attempt at the execution of the disseminators’ agenda.

All this being said, any recounting of *what really happened* is incomplete without the testimonies of those who stood against the encouragement of hateful fabrications, malicious ideologies, and the violence instigated by propaganda. Many Jews were saved by Muslims during the 1941 Farhud. Accounts such as those of Abraham Cohen, Victor Cohen, and Mirella Hassan from Tunisia (who were sheltered and supported by Tunisian Muslims) and the stories of Yehuda Chacamon and Victor Kanaf (Polish Jews treated with humanity by Arab guards in internment camps in Libya and Morocco) must firmly stand out in historical memory. Victor Kanaf even [characterised](#) Jewish-Muslim relations during that time as akin to a ‘honeymoon’ in reference to Jewish-Arab communal dynamics.

Pro-Jewish sympathy among the Arab population was [pronounced](#) among the devout and influential. In Algiers, Abdelhamid Ben Badis of the Muslim religious establishment, and leader of Algeria’s Islah (Reform) Party, founded the Algerian League of Muslims and Jews. While Moroccan Sultan Muhammad V [signed](#) anti-Jewish decrees pertaining to residence and employment, he [insisted](#) upon laws that protected Jewish lives, appalled that Vichy based its anti-Jewish laws on race [determined by Jewish bloodline] as opposed to their religious identification religion [professed as either Jewish, Christian, or Muslim], publicly [declaring](#), ‘just as in the past, the Israelites will remain under my protection, I refuse to make any distinction between my subjects.’ Other notable figures from the Middle East, though not Arab, include Turkish Diplomat Nedcdet Kent, who [jumped](#) on a cattle car headed to Auschwitz, refusing to disembark until the Nazis released eighty Jews. Abdul Husai Sardhari, an Iranian diplomat stationed in Paris, valiantly [protected](#) 150 Jews. The roster of the virtuous

individuals is extensive, showcasing the numerous instances of human kindness, empathy and compassion during periods of agonising adversity.

The positive historical events of *what really happened* remains key to envisioning the potential for Arab-Jewish unity. The hatred of Jews or any individual based on their identity is contradictory to the fundamental principle of tolerance and peace-oriented tenets in Islam. “Islam is not Islamism,” a Muslim friend of mine clarified. Those interpreting the Quran “literally” in such a manner as to weaponize Islam to gain power may perpetuate acts of hate. One example can be found in the Hamas charter, explicitly articulating its mission to eliminate the Jewish homeland and people. The Quranic verse 7:163–6 that states, “One day, Allah brought down his punishment and turned those that fished on the day of Sabbath into monkeys and apes for three days, and then they vanished” may be presented as one that is in inherent conflict with Judaism as well. However, as Palestinian Peace Activist and Professor Mohammad Dajani shared with me, the Prophet Mohammad’s teaching intends to punish those who are impious to morality itself—violating love, peace and kindness, symbolised by the Sabbath in this verse. To throw Islam in the bucket of religious fanaticism is not only wrong, but a perversion that can be applied to all religions if Biblical literature is taken literally, radicalised, and politicised.

Simultaneously, the bleak historical accounts must serve as strong precaution, with the reality that antisemitism has permeated deeply into Arab societies. This demands continued vigilance to the ingredients of totalitarianism in order to forestall the further advance of Nazi-like influence that precipitated the Holocaust.

THE IMPACT OF NAZI PROPAGANDA AND POLITICISED RELIGION

The Arab [rejection](#) of the 1937 Peel Commission’s proposal, most notable for proposing the partition of Mandatory Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, led to further tensions and conflicts in the region. The years that followed marked a critical inflection point in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, laying the groundwork for future disputes and conflict.

Upon the State of Israel’s inception in 1948, her Arab neighbour states, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, pursued Hitler’s mission by attempting to eradicate the newly established nation following the Arab League’s rejection of the 1947 UN partition plan. The Arab war effort found the aid of former Nazis. 6,000 ex-Nazis may have worked in Egypt and Syria. For example, Johann Von Leers escaped to Argentina and later Egypt, where he [became](#) Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser’s right-hand in creating Nazi-style anti-Israel propaganda. Following Al-Husseyni’s projections, Arab countries aspiring toward independence used Nazi propaganda in ways that [suggested](#) their compatibility with the ideology of National Socialism.

Indeed, Al-Husseyni’s ambitions of Jewish ethnic cleansing materialised in the 20th century’s second half: **Some one million Jews were forcibly expelled from Libya, Algeria,**

Morocco, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Iran. While Iran remained more tolerant than Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated nations, it was only after Khomeini's rise to power in 1979 that antisemitic propaganda began to infiltrate Iranian society. In the 1990's approximately three-quarters of Iran's 80,000 Jews proceeded to flee. Iran's Jewish community [comprising](#) some 8,300 members, however, remains one of the [largest](#) in the Middle East outside Israel, just after Turkey. It is important to note that these are both Middle Eastern, yet not Arab countries. The largest Arab country, Algeria, is home to less than 200 Jews today and the second largest, Egypt, retains less than five.

Throughout Israel's formative years, most particularly during the 1967 Six-Day War, Nazi propaganda persisted in the Arab world, gaining further momentum with the Soviets' shift of allegiance from Israel to the Arabs as a means to weaken Western influence in the Middle East. The USSR, under its self-depiction as a 'left-wing anti-racist international superpower,' in the [words](#) of Izabella Tavarovsky, 'cleverly reframed its narrative around *The Protocols* as a Marxist-Leninist critique.' It strategically employed antisemitic tropes against Zionists as opposed to the overt targeting of Jews in Soviet propaganda showcasing Israelis as Nazis—[drawing](#) directly from the imagery and narrative of Jews in *The Protocols*. It equated Zionists and the Star of David to that era's most loathsome evils and condemnable acts: apartheid, genocide, colonialism, imperialism and racism, [culminating](#) in the successful passage of the 'Zionism is Racism' resolution at the United Nations in 1975, later repealed in 1991.

To this day, such propaganda dominates the educational curriculum in much of the Arab world and media. In Egypt, *The Protocols* has [been](#) a best-selling book, and the inspiration of a similarly-themed TV show that aired on Egyptian TV in 2002. The most dangerous appropriations of Nazi propaganda are those coupled with Holocaust distortion and denial, most notably by Palestinian leaders weaponizing the Holocaust to fuel the demonization and delegitimation of Israel. Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas, has justified Hitler's crimes against the Jews, likened Israelis to Nazis, [stating](#) that they 'lie like Goebbels,' and accused Israel of committing '50 holocausts' against the Palestinians.' The misinformation campaign and dissemination of hateful rhetoric is rampant and exceedingly effective. In a tweet this past February, The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel tweeted a photo displaying the corpses of Jews at Nordhausen concentration camp as 'evidence' of the alleged murder of Palestinians by Israelis during the battle for Tantura in 1948.

The influence of Nazi-influenced anti-Zionist Soviet propaganda has left an indelible mark on contemporary antisemitism in the Arab world and across the globe. As witnessed in Nazi Germany, Jew-hatred inspired by radical theology and politics—the likes of Jihadic Islamism, Hitler-era Fascism, or Soviet-era Marxism—has insidiously conquered naive minds over generations. Nazi-produced 'Free Arabia' patches on Arab soldiers in the 1940s exemplifies this clever manipulation. The Germans leveraged Arab resentment toward the British and French, orchestrating a campaign to indoctrinate them into committing crimes against the Jews. This parallels the modern-day indoctrination of Palestinian school children with textbooks and educational material that advocate 'Free Palestine' and the demand for the eradication of the Jewish state under the guise of Palestinian freedom. Under this veil exists

the notorious Islamism and jihadic ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which aspires not only to eradicate Jews, but any non-Islamist or those opposing the formation of a new Islamic caliphate. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood [inspired](#) the Kholmeinst movement in Iran that seized control in 1979, whose modern proxies – Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis – actively seek the destruction of Israel and the West today. Afterall, the Houthi slogan is “death to Israel, death to America.”

Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, dedicating much of his life to human-rights advocacy, famously remarked that ‘those who forget history are akin to repeating it a second time.’ Now, nearly eight decades post-Holocaust, the use of remembrance as a tool against future atrocities is imperative. Wiesel’s sentiment suggests an understanding of the past, acknowledging grievances, and learning from historical mistakes. In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, this entails a genuine recognition of the historical pain associated with *the truth* and *what really happened*, in order to work effectively towards a mutually agreeable solution.

MOVING ON: THE FUTURE OF ARAB-ISRAELI AND ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS

Efforts to guide much of the Arab world away from antisemitism has been hindered by the utter absence of denazification and education about the Jewish people, alongside ideological and politically-motivated hatred. The Palestinian viewpoint [claims](#) that the establishment of the state of Israel was enabled by Western nations motivated by their guilt over the Holocaust; that the Nakba, the expulsion and displacement of 700,000 Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, is tantamount to the systematic extermination of six million Jews during the Holocaust; and that the Holocaust is a purely Western and Christian crime unrelated to them or other Arabs. Former Knesset Member, Dr. Einat Wilf, further [categorised](#) these arguments as (i) ‘Holocaust denial, Holocaust minimization (‘6 million is an exaggerated number’); (ii) Holocaust equalisation (‘there were other genocides and ethnic cleansings, the Holocaust was no different’); (iii) Holocaust reversal (‘what the Nazis did to the Jews is what the Jews are doing to others’); (iv) Holocaust marginalisation (‘other people were also killed in the War’); and (v) Holocaust by association (‘the Palestinians are the secondary victims of the Holocaust’).

While weaponizing the Holocaust in casting Israel as the ultimate evil, Arab anti-Zionism demonstrates a concern ‘not with what Israel does but what Israel is,’ as Dr. Wilf suggests. Dor Shachar, a former Gazan who converted to Judaism after fleeing to Israel, describes how his education was ‘focused on martyrdom, not life skills,’ having been raised to believe that ‘Jews have three legs’ and that he ‘needed to kill Jews.’ Loay Al-Shareef from Saudi Arabia whom I personally met last summer, Hussain Abukar [Mansour](#) from Egypt, Lebanese-Iraqi Hussain-Abdul-[Hussain](#), and Muhajeed [Kobbe](#) from the United Arab Emirates, all shared similar stories from their childhoods. Countering misinformation with factual and earnest conversation about Israel—its people, culture, history, and language—plays a pivotal role in disrupting the cycle of hatred between Arabs and Israelis.

The burdensome impact of Palestinian intransigence has led to a significant waning of anti-Zionist sentiment in some parts of the Arab world, particularly among Gulf-area nations. This weariness along with the geopolitical interests of some Arab countries laid the groundwork for The Abraham Accords, leading to the normalisation of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

Bridging the gap between Jewish and Arab worlds requires an Arab acknowledgement and comprehension of the Jews' most deep-seated trauma, the Holocaust, and the ethnic [cleansing](#) of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa during the mid-late 20th century. Signatory countries to the Abraham Accords have made remarkable strides in this regard, including visits to Jerusalem's World Holocaust Centre, Yad Vashem. The UAE, most notably, has [taken](#) a step further, becoming the first Arab nation to impart Holocaust education in schools and purging antisemitic material from its literature.

Abrahamic success and similar breakthroughs can only succeed via the cultivation of people-to-people relationships through education. Yet, the persistence of antisemitic teachings, notably in UN Refugee Works Agency programs, hinders the possibility of peaceful Israeli-Palestinian relations. Moreover, the celebratory parades in Palestinian cities following acts of terrorism, exemplified by the reactions to Hamas' attack on October 7th, resonate deeply with many Israelis, evoking sombre memories of the Holocaust, as well as massacres in the Arab and Muslim world. Indeed, recent polling [revealed](#) that three in four Palestinians believe the attacks of October 7th were correct.

Improving the outlook for future Palestinian generations involves putting an end to the spread of hatred and incendiary indoctrination. To this end, the West and the United Nations must cease indulging the Palestinian irreconcilable dream of 'the right to return' and a 'Free Palestine from the River to the Sea.' Applying the Abrahamic model to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires the dismantling of institutions of Jew and Western hatred, both political and educational. This entails stopping the promotion of the obliteration of the Jewish state. Such education should encompass a comprehensive understanding of the Holocaust, the dangerous ideologies that led to it, and acknowledging Arab role during that period, both favourable and adverse. Educational curricula must emphasise the historical and contemporary harmonies between Arabs and Jews, the similarities shared by the Judeo-Islamic traditions, and the promotion of Abrahamic initiatives. To this end, leaders akin to Palestinian peace activist Mohammed Dajani become essential in guiding new Palestinian generations. Dajani [brought](#) a delegation of thirty Palestinian students to Auschwitz and established the *Wasatia* movement (meaning 'middle ground' in Arabic) emphasising tolerance, empathy, and [moderation](#).

CONCLUSION

The role of the Arab world during the Holocaust years requires a nuanced understanding of *what really happened* to get to the core of *the truth*. Examining the diverse events of the Nazi era, encompassing indifference, passive complicity and exploitation to courageous

protection—during the Nazi era, alongside national interests, underscores the complexity of history and the importance of probing beyond dichotomous narratives that result in rigid and misguided beliefs that hinder open-mindedness and mutual understanding.

The exploitation of Holocaust history for ideological and political gain and the dissemination of hate-filled rhetoric are a critical impediment to a shared Muslim-Jewish future, particularly as it concerns Israelis and Palestinians. The Abraham Accords represent a colossal leap forward. They offer hope and highlight the importance of education in understanding the historical realities of the Middle East. Reconciliation and true progress, however, is contingent upon the dismantling of indoctrinating institutions promoting misinformation, hate, and violence.

Heeding Mohammad Dajani's insightful [words](#): 'Learning the tragic lessons of the past is necessary to avoid their recurrence in the present and future. Showing empathy and compassion for the suffering of others, even if no relations, friendship, or love bonds you with them, would make this world a better place. Learning the tragic lessons of the past is necessary to avoid their recurrence in the present and future. It is a sign of respect for the truth. When truth is denied or ignored, it destroys those values we cherish.'

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