

Jews and Islam

People of the book - Two books look at the touchy subject of Muslim attitudes to Jews

Tuesday 17 August 2010, by [The Economist](#) (Date first published: 12 August 2010).

***In Ishmael's House: A History of Jews in Muslim Lands.* By Martin Gilbert. Yale University Press; 320 pages; £25 and \$35. Buy from [Amazon.com](#), [Amazon.co.uk](#)**

***The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives.* By Gilbert Achcar. Metropolitan Books; 400 pages; \$30. Saqi; £25. Buy from [Amazon.com](#), [Amazon.co.uk](#)**

FROM 624 to 628AD, several Jewish clans in the Arabian peninsula joined forces with an Arab tribe, the Quraysh, to make war on a renegade Qurayshi named Muhammad who had had the chutzpah to claim he was a prophet of God. They lost. Piqued at the Jews for rejecting a creed that—with its dietary laws, ritual circumcision and daily prayers towards (at first) Jerusalem—was so closely modelled on their own, the Prophet Muhammad decreed that they, along with Christians, would henceforth be considered *dhimmiyeen* under Islam; “protected” as fellow monotheists, but subject to a heavy tax and various other indignities.

Dhimma status was later extended to other religions, then abolished by the Ottoman Turks in the 19th century. It is often still invoked by Islamophobes today as proof that Islam is inherently intolerant and, specifically, anti-Semitic. Martin Gilbert, a British Jew who was knighted in 1995, and Gilbert Achcar, a Lebanese-French Christian, have both written books in which this question looms large. It would be hard to find two more different treatments.

For Sir Martin the *dhimma* restrictions form the conceptual framework, such as it is, of “In Ishmael’s House”, his history of Jewish life under Muslim rule. He relates how, although they often lived in peace and wealth and sometimes reached the very top posts in Muslim administrations, as *dhimmiyeen* the Jews remained second-class citizens who never knew when prosperity might give way to pogroms.

Sir Martin is no Islamophobe, and his is a solid and balanced, if unexciting, chronicle of both ups and downs in Jewish fortunes. But it is nothing more. Although he gives a clear-eyed account of the conflict that prompted Muhammad to impose *dhimma* status on the Jews, he offers virtually no political or social context for the actions of any Muslim leader thereafter. This makes for a monotonous and ahistorical narrative: under more tolerant caliphs the Jews prospered, yet still suffered isolated attacks; under crueller ones they were oppressed, yet individual Muslims still performed acts of kindness, and so on for 12 centuries. Moreover, Christians and other *dhimmiyeen* are absent from the tale, so there is no sense of whether Jews were being singled out.

Things improve a little in the 20th century, the second half of the book. Here Sir Martin, best known as Winston Churchill’s official biographer, is on home turf, and he writes about the obvious effects of world wars, colonialism and the rise of Israel on the decline of Jewish-Muslim relations. There are some gripping moments in the eyewitness accounts of anti-Jewish riots in Cairo or Baghdad, but

here again he remains largely silent on Muslim thinking and perceptions.

It is not clear whether the author was trying to avoid controversy or is just uninterested in anything but what Jews experienced. Either way, the extraordinary result is that not once does this book about Jews under Islam tackle the question of Muslim anti-Semitism head-on. (The phrase does not even appear in the index.)

By contrast, Mr Achcar's "The Arabs and the Holocaust" looks at it in considerable detail. The book is a study of the evolving attitudes of four different political streams in the 20th-century Arab world: liberal Westernisers, Marxists, nationalists and pan-Islamists. The picture that emerges, especially in the years before the state of Israel, is a complex and nuanced one that rewards careful reading.

For instance, Arab Marxists in the 1930s found common ground with the then significant groups of Jewish anti-Zionists. Some Arab nationalists admired Zionism as an example even though they opposed the end result, and the more liberal ones welcomed a Jewish national home in Palestine, just not a Jewish state. Only the more extreme thinkers embraced the Nazis as enemies of the Jews; most saw them as racist colonialists. Muhammad Amin al-Husseini, the pro-Nazi Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who is the chief bogeyman of many pro-Israel histories, comes across as a weak leader with far less influence than is usually ascribed to him. Even the deep anti-Semitism common in today's Islamist groups like Hamas and Hizbullah was not, he argues, as marked in the early days of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928. By contrast, Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who broke the Arab taboo on peace with Israel and paid for it with his life in 1981, was "a notorious Jew-hater".

Mr Achcar is no apologist for prejudice, and at times harshly criticises what he sees as a decline in Arab intellectualism and good sense. He also rebukes those Arabs who stoke anti-Semitism by blurring the distinction between Jews and Zionists (though, as he points out, Zionists tend to blur it themselves). Unlike Sir Martin, though, he dismisses the Jews' *dhimma* status—perhaps a little too hastily—as irrelevant compared with the Arab responses to colonialism, Israel and other geo-political forces.

"The Arabs and the Holocaust" may prove hard going for the casual reader. But it is a refreshing and original study, showing clearly that Muslim anti-Semitism is neither universal, nor inevitable, nor subject to pat explanations.

P.S.

* From The Economist, Aug 12th 2010:

http://www.economist.com/node/16789290?story_id=16789290