

An Arab narrates Holocaust

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Only 6,300 Arabs served in German military while hundreds of thousands (including 9,000 Palestinians) of them fought in the Allied ranks. Of the 97,000 French casualties from Tunisian campaign to German surrender, 52 percent were Muslims. Albania was the only country in Europe to come out of second world war with a larger Jewish population than it had at the beginning of the war

In an age of superficial best-sellers, scholarly endeavors often at best end up in libraries and keep gathering dust. Books that instead of conforming to clichés tend to deconstruct myths, do not often appeal editors of newspapers' cultural sections. However, every now and then a work by sheer force of intellectual strength and scholarly weight becomes irresistible. Gilbert Achcar's latest book 'Arabs and the Holocaust' is one such powerful work. Even importantly, Gilbert has dealt with a topic extremely touchy for West, Israel as well as the Arab world.

For West, Holocaust is an extremely sensitive issue. In 12 Western countries, denying Holocaust has been criminalized. For Israel, Holocaust (Shoah in Hebrew, meaning catastrophe) is an 'industry'. Pointing out the potential of 'Holocaust Industry', Gamal Nasser was notifying as early as 1965: 'Over the past ten years, Israel has received 3,700 million dollars from Germany, that is, more than a million every day.' For Arab world, Shoah has become, in the words of Edward Said, 'an obfuscatory confection created by the elders of Zion.' In case, it is not denied, Hitler's crimes are sanctioned with the refrain: he should have finished the job. Zionist machine happily advertises such outbursts and Holocaust-denials in West to paint Arabs as barbarians lacking humanism. To further discredit Arabs, West is swamped with barrage of copious literature on pre-Israel leader, Grand Mufti Hajj Amin, who collaborated with Hitler.

The 'Arabs and the Holocaust' debunks all cult-like clichés about Arab attitudes towards Holocaust. Arab attitudes vary towards Shoah as well as Zionism. Zionism even had a few Arab allies like Jordan's King Abdullah and Lebanese Maronites. During the Nazi-era, when both Israel and Holocaust were in the making, Arab world had been convulsed by four competing currents. Westernised liberals, Marxists, nationalists and fundamentalist Pan-Islamists. Inspired by Enlightenment, liberals staunchly opposed Nazism. For instance weekly Al-Risala with a circulation of 40,000 and contributors like Taha Hussein or Husayn Haykal was running scathing refutations of Nazism. These liberals, nonetheless, did not hold mass appeal given the contradiction between Western values and Western occupation of Arab world. Similarly, Marxists with many Jews in their ranks were fighting back Nazi ideas in Arab world. During Hitler-Stalin pact (1939-41), they briefly toned down their criticism of Germany. Tiny but vibrant Trotskyist currents, however, constituted an exception. Likewise, dominant nationalist currents (notably Bath) refused to sympathise Nazism. However, ultra-nationalists (Young Egypt, Lebanese SSNP) simply emulated Nazism but not necessarily collaborated with Hitler's Germany. It was Grand Mufti who nakedly teamed up with Herr Fuhrer and the Duce on the pretext of 'enemy's enemy becomes friend'. Pan-Islamist Mufti, therefore, had to ignore brutal handling of Libya at the 'friendly' Italian hands as well as to overlook Hitler's classification of Arabs as a race inferior even to Jews. It is this Hitler-Mufti alliance that often translates into book-titles adorned with unavoidable picture of Mufti shaking hand with Hitler.

By catapulting Mufti to the status of Palestinians' sole leader, Zionism exploits his reputation. True, Mufti was considered a major leader in the absence of viable alternative as was the case with Yasser Arafat.

Unlike Arafat, Mufti was discredited in his life time. He fell from grace when he escaped in burka from Al-Aqsa mosque to avoid British wrath (reminding Lal Mosque's Mullah Abdul Aziz). His support for Italy, occupying Libya, further discredited him. Bankruptcy of his alliance with Nazism, proven during Al-Nakba (Catastrophe, a term for Palestinian expulsion in 1948) in 1948, delivered the end of his leadership. On his death in early 70s, not a single street was named after him. Without Zionist propaganda, his memory would have disappeared from Palestinian consciousness. A Google search conducted in 2008, turned up ten times more results for Mufti in English than on Arabic pages. In the hullabaloo about Mufti's collaboration, Zionism deliberately goes schizophrenic. That only 6,300 Arabs served in German military while hundreds of thousands (including 9,000 Palestinians) of them fought in the Allied ranks, is ignored even by colonial ingratitude. Of the 97,000 French casualties from Tunisian campaign to German surrender, 52 percent were Muslims. Similarly, Albania was the only (Muslim) country in Europe to come out of second world war with a larger Jewish population than it had at the beginning of the war (Albanian Muslims have been honoured in Israel as 'righteous Gentiles'). It was in fact, Zionism dealing with Nazism in 1930s while its Maximalist faction having affinities with Mussolini's Rome.

In the immediate post-Shoah period, marked by Nasserism's rise, denying Holocaust was not in fashion. Not even Mufti, unlike his present admirers, played the perverse game of denying Holocaust. Even Hassan Nasrallah-style anti-Semitism ('Jews are pigs') was on the fringe. Yasser Arafat was proclaiming to create 'a progressive, democratic and nonsectarian Palestine in which Christians, Muslims and Jews will worship, work and live peacefully and enjoy equal rights.'

Denying Holocaust gained currency in last three decades. This denial is invoked by many factors. It is a way to vent anger when Israel keeps asserting a monopoly of victimhood by invoking Shoah. Most importantly, it is an attempt to make others believe that Jews are born conspirators, hence, seeking consolation by mobilizing conspiracy theories to explain Zionist success in building a state powerful than all Arab states put together. Two cases of Holocaust denial in last 15 years have attracted worldwide attention. First when French convert Roger Garaudy in his 1995 book contested Holocaust's validity and had to face a trial in France. Arab Holocaust deniers taunted France for not upholding freedom of speech. In a scathing statement, Edward Said reprimanded the advocates of free expression. He said:

by recognizing the Holocaust for the genocidal madness that it was, we can then demand from Israelis and Jews the right to link the Holocaust to Zionist injustices towards the Palestinians, link and criticize the link for its hypocrisy and flawed moral logic.

But to support the efforts of Garaudy and his Holocaust-denying friends in the name of 'freedom of opinion' is a silly ruse that discredits us more than we already are discredited in the world's eyes for our incompetence, our failure to fight a decent battle, our radical misunderstanding of history and the world we live in. Why don't we fight harder for freedom of opinion in our own societies, a freedom, no one needs to be told, that scarcely exist?

Again, when Ahmadinejad in 2005 issued a statement in Mecca (also to embarrass his hosts) denying Holocaust, he handed Zionists down a new whip to lash Arabs with. Meantime, in 2001 a conference moot for Holocaust deniers was planned in Beirut. When Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Elias Khouri resisted, the moot was cancelled. Such intellectual giants have always resisted Holocaust denying.

Regardless of the attitudes of varying ideological currents, Arabs of all political orientations opposed the Jewish immigration to Palestine in pre-Israel period while all of them talk about Nakba in relation to Shoah. Gilbert sums up this particular Arab attitude: 'Holocaust was incomparably crueler and bloodier than the Nakba. This consideration, however, in no way diminishes the tragedy of the Palestinians, particularly since they did not, as a people, bear any blame for the destruction of European Jewry'. How true!

(All the facts and quotations, but not necessarily all the ideas, have been cited from Gilbert Achcar's 'Arabs and the Holocaust'. A short version of this piece has been run by *The News*).

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P.S.

* From Viewpoint:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/fullstory.php?t=An%20Arab%20narrates%20Holocaust&f=full-7-july-16.php&y=2010&m=july>

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