

The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives by Gilbert Achcar

Tariq Ali applauds an attempt to analyse the Arab-Israeli conflict

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On *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, by Gilbert Achcar.

“Since the fourth century after Christ,” wrote the late Raul Hillberg in his masterwork, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, “there have been three anti-Jewish policies: conversion, expulsion, and annihilation. The second appeared as an alternative to the first, and the third emerged as an alternative to the second.” What this suggests is that “Judeo-Christian civilisation” is a relatively new and an essentially ideological construct.

If anything, from the eighth to the 19th centuries, there can be said to have existed an Islamo-Judaic civilisation that spanned the Iberian peninsula, the Arab world proper, Persia and the Ottoman lands. The Christian reconquest of Portugal and Spain led to forced conversions and expulsion of Jews and Muslims. Tens of thousands of Jews were given refuge in Muslim North Africa and the Ottoman empire.

It was not until after the first world war that relations between the communities began to deteriorate seriously. The reason for this was the Balfour declaration (opposed by Edwin Montagu, the only Jewish member of the British cabinet) that offered a homeland in Palestine to the Zionist Federation, without any consultations whatsoever with the people who lived on the land. Hitler and the judeocide of the second world war further cemented the foundations of the settler-state and led to the nakba for the Palestinian Arabs of the region. Hardly surprising that this led to the “war of narratives”.

In a systematic and scholarly refutation of the simplistic myths that have arisen following the formation of Israel, Gilbert Achcar, the Lebanese-French historian, who is currently professor of international relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies, has provided us with the best book on the subject so far. Achcar has little time for Arab pieties. He makes no bones about the fact that Holocaust denial is not uncommon in the Middle East and that charlatan historians (Roger Garaudy is one of many examples cited in the book) have received a warm welcome from many in power in the Gulf states. He could have added that the late King Ibn Saud of the kingdom that bears his name was in the habit of presenting visiting western leaders with copies of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. There is no recorded instance of any US President or western European leader refusing the gift.

Achcar also informs us that it is the Arabs with whom the Israelis chose to mate (the late Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Abu Mazen, the current leader of the PLO), who are on record as crude antisemites. Much space is devoted to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and his meetings with the Nazis during the second world war. All this is true, but was not restricted to Palestine. Since nationalists were fighting the British and Dutch empires in many parts of the world, some of the nationalist

leaders based their tactics on the wrong-headed basis of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. Subhash Chandra Bose in India is the best-known example. He helped organise Hindu, Muslim and Sikh Indian prisoners-of-war in Japanese camps into an Indian National Army that fought alongside the Japanese. After the war Nehru donned his lawyer’s gown to defend the INA in court. They were popular throughout India.

But was Gamal Abdel Nasser, the founder of modern Egypt, an antisemite, as depicted in numerous Israeli accounts? Or an Arab Hitler, as portrayed by the British prime minister, Anthony Eden, prior to the Anglo-French-Israeli assault on Egypt in 1956? Achcar provides chapter and verse to the contrary. Nasser may have made mistakes, but essentially the tenor of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 60s was “of a socialist, anti-imperialist bent”. Nasser’s principal critique of Israel was not ethnic but political: he saw the Israeli state as a “tool of the imperialist powers”. He cites examples of how the Israeli government orchestrated a campaign to encourage the old Egyptian (and Baghdadi) Jewish communities to migrate to Israel, where their writers and poets wrote longingly about what they had left.

The book, which also contains numerous references to supportive Israeli literature on the subject, is a valuable corrective, especially in these times when Tzipi Livni, as foreign minister, could declare that: “The Palestinians can celebrate an independence day if, on that day, they eliminate the word *nakba* from their vocabulary.” Achcar’s comment is admirably restrained: “Statist Zionism is a Janus, one face towards the Holocaust, the other toward the *nakba*, one towards persecution endured, the other towards oppression inflicted . . . yet only recognition of both can bring Israelis, Palestinians and other Arabs into a genuine dialogue.”

Hillberg, Peter Novick, Tony Judt, Gabi Piterburg, Norman Finkelstein, Amira Hass and numerous others of Jewish origin have warned against the uses being made of the Holocaust in contemporary politics, and not just in Israel. It is short-sighted and counterproductive.

It will not help towards a settlement in the region. Nor will official Israeli attempts, mimicked by their apologists in the west, to declare that all those who oppose Israel’s repression in Gaza and the occupied territories are anti-semites. Crude propaganda of this sort, which debases history and politics, might even lead some to accept the label as a price to be paid for opposition to Israeli policies. Achcar’s volume is a bold attempt to avoid partisanship. An Arabic edition has just been published in Cairo. One looks forward to a Hebrew equivalent.

Tariq Ali

P.S.

* From The Guardian, Saturday 26 June 2010:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/26/arabs-holocaust-israeli-war-narratives>

* Tariq Ali’s The Protocols of the Elders of Sodom: And Other Essays is published by Verso.