

## Religious Roots of Islamic Antisemitism

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The tension that exists today between Muslims and Jews is not an entirely modern phenomenon. Muhammad came into conflict with the Jewish tribes of his time, and this conflict ended in tragedy. Throughout the history of Islam Muhammad's reported anti-Jewish sentiments, preserved in the Qur'an and hadith (traditional collected sayings of Muhammad), have affected relations between Muslims and Jews. Muhammad's victories over the Jews have found echoes in shouts uttered in both verbal and physical attacks on Jews, cries like "*Khaybar Khaybar ya yahud, jaish Muhammad soufa ya'oud*" ("Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the army of Mohammed will return"), recalling Muhammad's attack on the Jewish community of Khaybar. Radical Islamists see Jews as enemies of Islam since the time of Muhammad. They aim not for peaceful coexistence but for total elimination. Today antisemitism reverberates throughout the Muslim world, sometimes erupting with vicious intensity – this is what happened on October 7. Muhammad's own teachings, drawn from the hadith and the history recounted below, are often used to justify this violence.

Apologists for Islam traditionally blame the Jews for their troubled relations with Muhammad, accusing the Jews of breaking treaties and colluding with Muhammad's enemies. The truth is hardly that simple. Even the early Arabic sources, clearly biased in favor of Muhammad, tell a story that puts this narrative into serious question. We will look at these sources to understand the roots of this Muslim-Jewish tension.

The earliest biographies were written during the eighth and ninth centuries, by writers who recorded what they knew of Muhammad from oral traditions that they tried as best they could to authenticate. These biographies are called *sira*, and together with the hadith they constitute the *sunna* ("way," "example," or "tradition") of Islam. The earliest and most important of the *sira* is the *Sirat Rasul Allah* by Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. 767). We do not have this work in its original form, but in a revised and abridged version by his disciple 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham (d. 833). Other early Arabic biographies of Muhammad are by Muhammad ibn Umar al-Waqidi (d. 822), Muhammad ibn Sa'd (d. 845), and Abu Jafar al-Tabari (d. 923). In this essay we'll be relying on the principal source, Ibn Ishaq.

When the Jewish leaders of Medina first heard of the coming of a prophet preaching belief in one God, they were intrigued. They did not immediately accept or reject him, but they wanted to know more (Ibn Ishaq, 192).<sup>1</sup> Relations began to deteriorate as the Jews discovered Muhammad was not very familiar with their scriptures and traditions. The rabbis would taunt him with questions he could not answer (Ibn Ishaq, 351).

The Jews' rejection of Muhammad's message must have disappointed him greatly. He saw himself preaching the same monotheism to which the Jews subscribed – why then wouldn't they accept him as a prophet? To establish his affinity with the Jews, he borrowed some Jewish practices and prescribed them to his followers. Muslims were to meet for prayer on Friday afternoon as Jews prepare for the sabbath, they were to face Jerusalem in prayer as Jews do, they were to observe some of the Jewish dietary laws, as well as the fast on the Day of Atonement. Muslims called this the fast of *Ashura*, meaning "tenth," since the Day of Atonement falls on the tenth of the Jewish month of Tishri. When the Jews rejected his prophecy in spite of these practices, Muhammad changed those practices, fixing the *qibla* (direction of prayer) to Mecca instead of Jerusalem, and replacing Ashura with the fast of Ramadan.

### **The First Jewish Tribe: the Fate of the Bani Qaynuqa**

At that time there were three Jewish tribes in Medina; the first to be discussed were the Bani Qaynuqa. In his dealings with them, Muhammad's aspirations to be accepted as a Jewish prophet as well as his frustration and anger became very apparent.

After the battle of Badr, Muhammad called the Bani Qaynuqa to assemble in the marketplace. He demanded the Jews accept him as their prophet; he threatened them, and they responded with defiance:

The apostle assembled them in their market and addressed them as follows: "O Jews, beware lest God bring upon you the vengeance that He brought upon Quraysh and become Muslims. You know that I am a prophet who has been sent

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<sup>1</sup> References to Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad come from Alfred Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955; reprint, Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1967). Much of this material is included in F.E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). Numbers in references to Ibn Ishaq use the original pagination, standard across different editions.

– you will find that in your scriptures and God’s covenant with you.” They replied, “O Muhammad, you seem to think that we are your people. Do not deceive yourself because you encountered a people with no knowledge of war and got the better of them; for by God if we fight you, you will find that we are real men!” (Ibn Ishaq, 545)

Muhammad is then said to have received the following revelation:

“Say to those who disbelieve: You will be vanquished and gathered to Hell, an evil resting place. You have already had a sign in the two forces which met”; i.e. the apostle’s companions at Badr and the Quraysh. “One force fought in the way of God; the other, disbelievers, thought they saw double their own force with their very eyes. God strengthens with His help whom He will. Verily in that is an example for the discerning.” (Ibn Ishaq, 545; Qur’an 3:12-13)

At this point Ibn Hisham inserts the following incident into Ibn Ishaq’s narrative:

The cause of the Qaynuqa affair was that an Arab woman had come with some merchandise to the market of the Bani Qaynuqa. She sat down next to a goldsmith there. Then they began urging her to unveil her face, which she refused. The goldsmith moved close to the hem of her garment and tied it behind her back. When she got up her [privates] were exposed. They laughed at her, and she screamed. Then a Muslim jumped upon the goldsmith who was Jewish and killed him. Then the Jews overwhelmed the Muslim and killed him. The family of the slain Muslim called upon their coreligionists for help against the Jews. The Muslims were furious, and thus there was bad blood created between them and the Bani Qaynuqa.<sup>2</sup>

The historicity of this incident has been questioned:

Little credence need be given to the story of the trick, for it also appears in legends of pre-Islamic Arabia; but there may well have been some quarrel between Muslims and Jews. The deeper reason for Muhammad’s action, however, are obvious. The Jews were not prepared to become full members of the Islamic community, and therefore he had broken with them. They still had agreements of some sort with him, but he would be on the look-out to take advantage of any failure to fulfil the letter of the agreements. This is presumably what happened here.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 122-23. (The incident is omitted in Guillaume’s abridged English translation.)

<sup>3</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 130.

Nevertheless, the incident is often mentioned to explain Muhammad's violent reaction. Whether or not the incident is historical, its inclusion shows the biographer's need to provide a pretext for Muhammad's actions against the Qaynuqa. Muhammad besieged them and in two weeks forced them to surrender unconditionally – at best, an act of collective punishment. He would have killed them all, but spared their lives only at the behest of the leader of a neighboring Arab tribe, who pleaded on their behalf (Ibn Ishaq, 546). Muhammad then exiled the Bani Qaynuqa from Medina, eventually driving them out of Arabia completely.

By eliminating one community of nonbelievers Muhammad further strengthened his position. But he was not yet finished.

### **The Second Jewish Tribe: Bani Nadir**

Tensions had been growing between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes of Medina. While the Arab tribes were gradually being drawn to Islam, the Jews, already having a monotheistic faith and feeling no need for another prophet, held out. This weakened the ties between the Jews and those Arab tribes with which they were allied. Also, as we have seen, Muhammad began to threaten the Jews once they failed to show enthusiasm for Islam. Because of these developments the Jews felt isolated and endangered, and their sympathies naturally began to incline toward Muhammad's Meccan enemies.

Muhammad's harsh treatment of the Bani Qaynuqa must have alarmed the other Jewish tribes. Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, a leader and poet of the Bani Nadir, composed verses lamenting the Meccan defeat at Badr and satirizing Muhammad. This enraged Muhammad, so he had Ka'b assassinated, telling the killers it would be OK to lie in order to gain the confidence of their victim. (The story is recounted in Ibn Ishaq 550-51 and also in the hadith, *Sahih Bukhari*, 5:59:369.)

The final showdown between Muhammad and the Bani Nadir unfolded in a rather strange way. The narrative is long and somewhat confusing, but the result was that a follower of Muhammad killed two men of the tribe of Amir in a case of mistaken identity. So Muhammad had to pay blood money to the tribe of Amir for the lives of these two men. He agreed to do so both to avoid a vendetta and in hopes of winning the Amir tribe to Islam.

Muhammad now had to raise the money for the blood payment. He went to the Bani Nadir to get them to pay a part of it. He felt that the Jewish tribe should contribute because it had an alliance with the Bani Amir, and also because of the mutual defense pact that Muhammad had imposed on the tribes of Medina.

Muhammad's demands rested on very shaky ground. The Bani Amir were the tribe that his follower had wronged, and so their ally the Bani Nadir could not in justice be held liable. Furthermore, according to the pact that Muhammad himself had written, "The Jews must bear their expenses and the Muslims their expenses," and "A man is not liable for his ally's misdeeds" (Ibn Ishaq, 343). Muhammad thus had no basis for requiring the Bani Nadir to contribute. And in any case, Muhammad's murder of Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, for which he paid no blood money, effectively annulled any treaty between himself and the Bani Nadir. The Bani Nadir thus most likely regarded Muhammad's approach, with good reason, as an attempt at extortion.

Perhaps not really knowing what to do, the Jews signaled their agreement, then asked Muhammad to wait with his delegation while they prepared a meal. Meanwhile Muhammad excused himself and left the house. His companions went looking for him, and when they found him he told them an angel had revealed to him that the Bani Nadir were plotting to kill him. He then sent the Bani Nadir an ultimatum, demanding that they all leave the country within ten days or else be beheaded.<sup>4</sup> One hadith provides a direct quote:

Narrated Abu Huraira: While we were in the mosque, Allah's Apostle came out and said, "Let us proceed to the Jews." So we went out with him till we came to Bait-al-Midras. The Prophet stood up there and called them, saying, "O assembly of Jews! Surrender to Allah (embrace Islam) and you will be safe!" They said, "You have conveyed Allah's message, O Aba-al-Qasim" Allah's Apostle then said to them, "That is what I want; embrace Islam and you will be safe." They said, "You have conveyed the message, O Aba-al-Qasim." Allah's Apostle then said to them, "That is what I want," and repeated his words for the third time and added, "Know that the earth is for Allah and I want to exile you from this land, so whoever among you has property he should sell it, otherwise, know that the land is for Allah and His Apostle." (*Sahih Bukhari*, 9:92:447)

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 202.

Muhammad's accusation of a plot to assassinate him seems an obvious fabrication. There is no "evidence" save for the alleged word of an angel.

Muhammad's motivation was most likely not revenge for a presumed assassination plot. Enmity was increasing between the Muslims and the Jews, Muhammad had murdered the poet of the Bani Nadir, and might well expect them to retaliate. The hadith just quoted supplies another motive as well: Muhammad wanted Arabia only for Muslims.

And so Muhammad laid siege to the Bani Nadir, who held out in their forts as long as they could. Help expected from allied tribes never came – their members had already embraced Islam, or were intimidated by Muhammad. Finally when Muhammad cut down the palm trees of the Bani Nadir and burned them, their courage dissolved. They surrendered and Muhammad forced them into exile, then divided their property between himself and his followers.

The Qur'an attaches religious significance to these events:

Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, let it declare the Praises and Glory of Allah: for He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. It is He Who got out the Unbelievers among the People of the Book from their homes at the first gathering (of the forces). Little did ye think that they would get out: And they thought that their fortresses would defend them from Allah! But the (Wrath of) Allah came to them from quarters from which they little expected (it), and cast terror into their hearts, so that they destroyed their dwellings by their own hands and the hands of the Believers, take warning, then, O ye with eyes (to see)! And had it not been that Allah had decreed banishment for them, He would certainly have punished them in this world: And in the Hereafter they shall (certainly) have the Punishment of the Fire. That is because they resisted Allah and His Messenger: and if any one resists Allah, verily Allah is severe in Punishment. Whether ye cut down (O ye Muslim!) The tender palm-trees, or ye left them standing on their roots, it was by leave of Allah, and in order that He might cover with shame the rebellious transgressors. (59:1-5, trans. Yusuf Ali)

"Resisting" Muhammad, refusing to accept him on his terms, was considered grounds for divine condemnation. The chilling vindictiveness of Allah called down upon the Bani Nadir, in this world and in the world to come, places on this episode the stamp of *jihad*.

## **The Third Jewish Tribe: Bani Quraiza**

Muhammad's dealings with the Jewish tribe of Quraiza may well be the most controversial episode of his career. A number of writers have defended Muhammad's actions against the Jewish tribe, claiming that the Jews betrayed him by supporting his enemies during the crucial Battle of the Trench. Once again, a careful examination of the sources will show that the truth is not that simple. Whether or not one questions the sources' authenticity, one cannot question that they portray Muhammad as Islamic tradition understands him, the best of God's prophets and an example to be followed. Radical Islamists have in fact invoked such episodes in the recorded life of Muhammad as precedent for their violent actions.

After having defeated the Meccans at Badr, Muhammad knew that eventually a reprisal would come. The Meccans had to restore their prestige, as well as defend their tribal honor. Muhammad continued to attack their caravans, and the Meccans could not allow that. Their leader Abu Sufyan mobilized his forces and set out against Muhammad at what became known as the Battle of Uhud. He was not totally victorious against the Muslims, but he did inflict a major if temporary setback. Muhammad recovered and increased the scope of his raids.

Finally Abu Sufyan resolved to make an end of Muhammad once and for all. He raised a large army and set out to lay siege to Medina. Muhammad prepared by digging a huge trench around the vulnerable areas of Medina's perimeter. This effectively stopped the Meccans, who greatly depended on their cavalry, now rendered useless. The Meccan tribes gave up and went their separate ways. Greatly humiliated, they never again posed a serious challenge to the Muslims.

We now come to the role of the Jews of Quraiza. The following reconstruction is based exclusively on the Arabic sources. Admittedly these sources are biased against the Jews; even so they allow an unflattering evaluation of Muhammad's response.

As the two sides prepared for battle, the Bani Quraiza wanted to remain neutral, but after strong and unrelenting pressure from the chief of the exiled Bani Nadir, Ka'b ibn Asad, the head of the the Bani Qurayza, decided to support the Meccan coalition. Through his intelligence sources Muhammad found this out, so he devised a clever plan to neutralize the

support from Quraiza. He sent an infiltrator to sow dissension between Quraiza and the Meccans, leading each to suspect a sellout by the other. Thus when the time of battle arrived and the Meccans approached Quraiza for aid, the latter refused, asking for a sign of trust the Meccans were unwilling to give (Ibn Ishaq, 682). And so help from Quraiza, which might have been decisive, never came.

When Muhammad sent this infiltrator he made his often-quoted statement that “war is deception” (Ibn Ishaq, 681). Those words have been used for centuries to justify lying by Muslims in the name of jihad.

When Muhammad returned from battle, he received an angelic revelation directing him to attack the Jews:

When the Prophet returned from Al-Khandaq (i.e. Trench) and laid down his arms and took a bath, Gabriel came and said (to the Prophet), “You have laid down your arms? By Allah, we angels have not laid them down yet. So set out for them.” The Prophet said, “Where to go?” Gabriel said, “Towards this side,” pointing towards Banu Quraiza. So the Prophet went out towards them. (*Sahih Bukhari*, 5:59:443; parallel in Ibn Ishaq, 684)

Muhammad marched against the Quraiza and besieged them for twenty-five days. The Quraiza, desperate and terrified, knew they had run out of options. They asked Muhammad to send them Abu Lubaba of the tribe of Aws, a tribe with which the Quraiza had formerly been allied. Even though many of the Aws had now become Muslims, they and the Quraiza had once been friends, and the Quraiza needed someone to turn to for advice.

Then they sent to the apostle saying, “Send us Abu Lubaba... That we may consult him.” So the apostle sent him to them, and when they saw him they got up to meet him. The women and children went up to him weeping in his face, and he felt sorry for them. They said, “Oh Abu Lubaba, do you think that we should submit to Muhammad’s judgment?” He said, “Yes,” and pointed with his hand to his throat, signifying slaughter. (Ibn Ishaq, 686)

The next morning the Quraiza surrendered. The tribesmen of Aws approached Muhammad to intercede on their behalf, pleading for leniency. Muhammad then asked them if they would be satisfied if one of their own might make the determination of Quraiza’s fate. The Aws enthusiastically agreed. Muhammad then chose Sa’d ibn Mu’adh, one of their leaders.



The choice of Sa'd was significant, and hardly accidental. Sa'd had a well-known reputation for being both extremely ruthless and an enemy of the Jews. At the battle of Badr he objected when he saw some of Muhammad's men holding some enemy prisoners, and he told Muhammad: "It is the first defeat that God has brought on the infidel and I would rather see them slaughtered than left alive" (Ibn Ishaq, 446). And when Sa'd was seriously wounded at the Battle of Badr he said, "O God, seeing that you have appointed war between us and them grant me martyrdom and do not let me die until I have seen my desire upon B. Qurayza" (Ibn Ishaq, 679). Elsewhere Sa'd is described as "a man of hasty temper" (Ibn Ishaq, 675).

Muhammad surely knew all this about Sa'd, and this must have figured into his choice. A hadith tells us what happened next:

When the tribe of Bani Quraiza was ready to accept Sad's judgment, Allah's Apostle sent for Sad who was near to him. Sad came, riding a donkey and when he came near, Allah's Apostle said (to the Ansar), "Stand up for your leader." Then Sad came and sat beside Allah's Apostle who said to him. "These people are ready to accept your judgment." Sad said, "I give the judgment that their warriors should be killed and their children and women should be taken as prisoners." The Prophet then remarked, "O Sad! You have judged amongst them with (or similar to) the judgment of the King Allah." (*Sahih Bukhari*, 4:52:280)

In the corresponding place in Ibn Ishaq (689) Muhammad says to Sa'd: "You have given the judgment of Allah above the seven heavens." Clearly Muhammad is pleased. This is the outcome he wanted and expected. And this should come as no surprise. Muhammad wanted to do the same to the other two Jewish tribes, but was restrained and settled for exiling them.

Concerning the Bani Qaynuqa, we read:

'Abdullah b. Ubayy b. Salul [of the tribe of Khazraj in Medina] went to him when God had put them [the Qaynuqa] in his power and said, "O Muhammad, deal kindly with my clients" (now they were allies of Khazraj), but the apostle put him off. He repeated the words, and the apostle turned away from him, whereupon he thrust his hand into the collar of the apostle's robe; the apostle was so angry that his face became almost black. He said, "Confound you, let me go." He answered, "No, by God, I will not let you go until you deal kindly with my clients. Four hundred men without mail and three hundred mailed protected me from all mine enemies; would you cut them down in one morning? By God, I am a man who fears that circumstances may change." The apostle said, "You can have them." (Ibn Ishaq, 546)

Concerning the Bani Nadir, we have already quoted from the *Qur'an* above:

And had it not been that Allah had decreed banishment for them, He would certainly have punished them in this world. (59:3)

Ibn Ishaq (654) takes “punished them in this world” to mean “with the sword.” In other words, the Bani Nadir, like the Bani Qaynuqa, got off easy, something not to be repeated with the Quraiza.

This time Muhammad obtained an endorsement of his murderous intent from someone known to be hostile toward the Jews, yet from a tribe formerly allied to them, the Aws, thus making impossible any further protest by members of that tribe.

Muhammad went to the market in Medina and dug trenches. Then the men of Quraiza were brought out in batches, and Muhammad and his followers cut off their heads. According to Ibn Ishaq (690), the number of dead ranged between 600 and 900. Afterwards Muhammad divided their property, their women, and their children among his followers.

A number of ahadith supply additional details. How did Muhammad distinguish the adult males, who would be executed, from the children, whose lives would be spared?

Narrated Atiyah al-Qurazi: I was among the captives of Banu Qurayzah. They (the Companions) examined us, and those who had begun to grow hair (pubes) were killed, and those who had not were not killed. I was among those who had not grown hair. (*Sunan Abu Dawud*, 38:4390)

“Adult” males marked for death could be very young indeed.

The following *hadith* is one of the most widely quoted even today to justify antisemitic hatred, and figures in the Hamas Charter:

Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: The last hour would not come unless the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them until the Jews would hide themselves behind a stone or a tree and a stone or a tree would say: Muslim, or the servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him; but the tree Gharqad would not say, for it is the tree of the Jews. (*Sahih Muslim*, 41:6985; see also 41:6981-84 and *Sahih Bukhari*, 4:52:176,177 and 4:56:791)

Recall that the Bani Quraiza had already surrendered and no longer posed a threat. Muhammad's treatment of them was purely vindictive.

### **The Jews of Arabia: Conclusion**

How do we evaluate this material? Many have tried to justify Muhammad's actions: Seventh-century Arabia was a tough neighborhood. Tribal vengeance was common. Members of different tribes had no responsibilities toward each other. Had Muhammad allowed the Quraiza to live, they would have continued to be a threat to him. Muhammad, unlike Jesus, was a statesman and had to do what he did.

Even Karen Armstrong, who takes great pains to justify everything Muhammad did, can hardly keep from showing her revulsion:

It is probably impossible for us to dissociate this story from Nazi atrocities and it will inevitably alienate people irrevocably from Muhammad. But Western scholars like Maxime Rodinson and W. Montgomery Watt argue that it is not correct to judge the incident by twentieth-century standards. This was a very primitive society – far more primitive than the Jewish society in which Jesus had lived and promulgated his gospel of mercy and love some 600 years earlier. At this stage the Arabs had no concept of a universal natural law, which is difficult – perhaps impossible – for people to attain unless there is a modicum of public order, such as that imposed by a great empire in the ancient world.<sup>5</sup>

This is quite astonishing. Muhammad, held up as a great spiritual leader and founder of a great religion, is to be judged by the standard of his time, as a member of “a very primitive society” that knew no “universal natural law” but only the law of the jungle. The great spiritual figures of other religious traditions were conciliators, and they courageously opposed the inhumane trends of their times. Muhammad made no attempts at conciliation, except when it was politically expedient. He demanded that others convert to Islam and recognize him as a prophet; otherwise he fought them ruthlessly. Those who refused were not approached with peace and tolerance but preemptively eliminated. Muhammad, quite in contrast to Jesus, was a man of extreme vengeance and cruelty. To justify his actions as merely a product of his times is hardly the standard one expects of a great spiritual leader.

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperCollins, 1992), 207-8.

Even though Armstrong mentions W. Montgomery Watt, his assessment is more balanced than she suggests:

So much must be said in fairness to Muhammad when he is measured against the Arabs of his time. Muslims, however, claim that he is a model of conduct and character for all mankind. In so doing they present him for judgment according to the standards of enlightened world opinion.<sup>6</sup>

This is the real question. Muhammad undoubtedly was a gifted, even brilliant military leader and statesman. But do those qualities make him an outstanding spiritual leader, one to be imitated by all?

Muslim writers often fail to judge Muhammad by a uniform standard. They condemn the Quraiza for their “treachery,” but this is unfair even by the standards of Muhammad’s own time. The Quraiza had every reason to distrust and to oppose Muhammad. He had previously exiled Medina’s other two Jewish tribes. Why should the Quraiza have expected to be treated any better? Why should they not have tried to resist him? By remaining faithful to their own religion, they stood in the way of Muhammad’s vision of a unified Arabia exclusively under Islam. It is hypocritical to defend Muhammad’s tribalism while blaming the Quraiza for theirs.

The fact is that the Quraiza inflicted no damage on Muhammad. He had effectively neutralized their opposition, and they refused to cooperate with the Meccans against Muhammad. One hadith from the respected collection of Imam Ahmad (d. 855) reports:

Abu Sufyan [a leader of the Qurayshi opposition to Muhammad] said, “O ye people of Quraysh, by Allah your [current] dwelling isn’t a place to be dwelled in; the horses [and camels, mules, etc..] have died, Bani Quraytha has turned us down – we received from them what we don’t like, and this wind is giving us what you see [a hard time]. By Allah, our cauldrons aren’t standing, the fires aren’t lasting, and the structures aren’t holding. So retreat for I am retreating.” (*Musnad Ahmad*, 22823 [parallel in Ibn Ishaq, 683])

The Bani Quraiza never did give active support to the Meccans at the Battle of the Trench. Nevertheless, they were punished severely. Instead of being exiled, as were the Bani Qaynuqa and Bani Nadir, they were executed, in a tribal conflict in which Muhammad cannot be said to have

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<sup>6</sup> Watt, *Muhammad*, 235.

held any moral advantage. Yes, everybody did it, that is what Arabia was like in those days. Members of rival tribes attacked each other all the time, and no tribe was morally superior to another. While Arabian society had no legal system similar to what we have today, it did have a respected custom of blood-guilt. Those who drew blood from another tribe were responsible for making it up, either in blood or in kind. One did not respond to an offense by liquidating the whole tribe. Such collective punishment is even prohibited by the Qur'an: "Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another" (6:164).

In intent and in action, Muhammad was a mass murderer. He engaged in the practice of beheading his enemies, as do some of today's terrorists who claim to follow his example. Today we have a name for forced large-scale exile. We call it ethnic cleansing. We have a name for the extermination of an entire tribe. We call it genocide.

In a weakly argued and logically flawed piece, W. N. Arafat tries to show that the massacre of the Quraiza never took place.<sup>7</sup> Even if he is correct, the point is moot. The Muhammad whom Islam venerates is the one reflected in these biographies and ahadith, which belong to the Sunna, the traditional teachings of Islam. These teachings are sources of spiritual guidance. And so if one defends Muhammad as *both* a great spiritual leader and a man of his time, then one makes his time normative for our time.

As Muhammad's power grew, so did his ambition. His mission became the unification of the Arab tribes under one faith, as a nation strong enough to challenge even the great empires. There was no room in this new nation for those who would not accept his prophecy. This meant in particular the Jews, since they were the major holdouts – even the Meccan tribes eventually adopted Islam. Any continuing organized Jewish presence in Arabia was a threat to Muhammad's vision, and so had to be eliminated. Islamic tradition records this sentiment in the following ahadith:

It has been narrated by 'Umar b. al-Khattib that he heard the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) say: I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslim. (*Sahih Muslim*, 19:4366)

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<sup>7</sup> W. M. Arafat, "New Light on the Story of Banu Qurayza and the Jews of Medina," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, (1976), 100-107.

Malik said that Ibn Shihab said, “Umar ibn al-Khattab searched for information about that until he was absolutely convinced that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, had said, “Two *deens* [religions] shall not co-exist in the Arabian Peninsula,’ and he therefore expelled the Jews from Khaybar.” *Malik's Muwatta*, 45.5.18)

While Muhammad wanted Arabia only for Muslims, there was special enmity toward the Jewish people: after they refused to recognize him as a prophet and follow him they were never forgiven. Thus were planted the seeds of an antagonism that has persisted to this day.

## Going Deeper

On October 7, 2023 the world witnessed a massacre of over 1200 Jews in Israel by terrorists claiming to be inspired by Islam. This was by no means the first such attack by Muslims against Jewish civilians – throughout history there have been many – but it was the worst on record. The cruelty was unimaginable. Children were not spared. Worst of all was the treatment of women: tortured, their bodies mutilated with sharp instruments while they were being gang-raped, then afterwards summarily executed. This was a denial of the Jews’ humanity. The idea that human beings could do this to each other defies belief, and yet it happened.

We have seen how roots of the conflict between Muslims and Jews go back as far as the time of Muhammad. It is possible to go even deeper into how the religious nature of this conflict accounts for its intensity. But before doing so, *it is critical to keep the following consideration in mind.*

While it is possible to identify broad historical patterns, those patterns do not determine the character and behavior of any individual. To any rule there are always exceptions. Throughout history individuals have always shown kindness to each other. The Albanian Muslims shielded their Jews from the Holocaust. There are stories of individual Muslims helping Jews during Muslim anti-Jewish riots. And there are also Muslims working toward reform, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, all within the sphere of Islam.<sup>8</sup> So there is no excuse for discrimination, and one must never assume anything about any Muslim individual without knowing that person, just as neither Jews nor members of any other group should ever be prejudged. Everything in our power, including uncompromising self-examination, must

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<sup>8</sup> E.g. Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003).

be done to minimize gratuitous hatred and even hate crimes. Nevertheless, hatred of Jews is so widespread and so intense throughout the Muslim world as to constitute a pattern that begs for an explanation. As with Christian antisemitism, it must be rooted to some significant extent in religion, for religion affects the human psyche on a very primitive level. Historical circumstances alone cannot explain it. And so it bears further investigation. When virtually the entire Muslim world arrays itself against the Jewish state, initiating one war after another against it, one wants to understand why.

The hatred the Hamas terrorists had for their Jewish victims was metaphysical. To wish to inflict as much pain and humiliation as possible on someone, and to do it with such joy, is beyond anything rationally conceivable. It is hard to imagine what besides a religious impulse could inspire a hatred that deep and that dehumanizing. If Muhammad had serious problems with all the Arabian Jews, then they must be children of the devil.<sup>9</sup> And so, for those inspired by this kind of religious ideology, no treatment of Jews could possibly be too harsh.

This may explain why, throughout the Muslim world and particularly in the Arab states, there has been almost universal antagonism and opposition toward the State of Israel ever since its founding. The Arab states banded together several times in efforts to eradicate Israel, though none of them succeeded. Now Iran, not Arab but Shiite Muslim, is hell-bent on finishing the job. Very large segments of the Muslim world seem motivated by a special animus against Jews. It is hard to imagine that if Israel had been any kind of a state other than a Jewish one it would be meeting the same level of animosity.

It is often said that Muslim-Jewish relations throughout history were not always bad. It is true that in medieval Spain Muslims were not burning Jews at the stake, as Christians often did. But that is a very low bar. At certain times – not at all times – Jews could live a relatively tranquil life under Muslim rule as long as they knew their place as *dhimmi*, second-class “protected” minorities, never equals. What the Muslim world seems unable to tolerate and resents to its core is a sovereign Jewish presence in their midst, where Jews are equal to them and in control of their own lives,

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<sup>9</sup> Christianity, which in its worst forms has inspired similar levels of hatred and violence against Jews, has within its scriptures a similar characterization (John 8:44).

even in a tiny country like Israel. It is only the Gulf States' fear of Iran that has made even modest efforts toward normalization thinkable.

The Hamas Charter expresses these sentiments clearly: "Israel, Judaism and Jews challenge Islam and the Muslim people" (Article 28). Hamas sees its struggle as a religious one, and its enemy is not just Israel but Jews and Judaism. Jews are the enemy of Islam, cursed by Allah, and thus deserving of the most extreme hatred. Killing Jews is in fact a sacred duty: the Hamas terrorists did not try to hide their crimes; to the contrary, they bragged about them and broadcast them on social media. One young terrorist who had murdered ten Jews called his parents on the cell phone of a woman he just killed and boasted: "Look how many I killed with my own hands! Your son killed Jews!" "Mom, your son is a hero." His parents responded with praise.<sup>10</sup>

As horrendous as all of this is, it is hardly just an aberration. Massive demonstrations erupted worldwide supporting Hamas and its October 7 attack. In none of these could be heard any reservations about how Hamas had treated their Jewish victims. Even demonstrators who might not have engaged in such violence themselves were in strong sympathy with it. The chant often heard, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!" is a clear call for the destruction of Israel.

So let's look a little deeper at where this special antipathy toward Israel might come from.

The two driving forces behind modern antisemitism are the unreformed forms of Christianity and Islam, and there are parallels between them that may prove instructive. I have treated the Christian case elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> To encapsulate very briefly, Christians appropriated the Jewish story as their own, expected Jews to follow them, and when they didn't, the resentment often became vicious and even violent. One good example, and there are many, is Martin Luther. He had hopes the Jews might join him and his reformation. But when they didn't, he turned on them with an intense hatred expressed in his infamous work *On the Jews and Their Lies*, calling for

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<sup>10</sup> Times of Israel Staff, "[IDF Publishes Audio of Hamas Terrorist Calling Family to Brag About Killing Jews](#)," *The Times of Israel*, October 25, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> C. Gourgey, "[The Moral Failure of Christian Theology](#)," *Judeochristianity.org*, April 2023.



hatred and even violence against Jews, which the Nazis drew upon in forming their own antisemitic propaganda. Had he attacked any other minority group the way he attacked Jews, there would be calls to tear down his statues and erase his name from history. But somehow Christianity does not find even this virulent level of antisemitism a disqualifying factor, or worth mentioning except perhaps very rarely as a mere parenthesis.

There is a striking parallel in the life of Muhammad. As we have already seen, at first Muhammad wanted to engage the Jews peacefully. He admired their tradition, and incorporated some Jewish practices, notably the *qibla* and Ashura mentioned above. He saw himself as a prophet of monotheism in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophets, and expected the Jews to accept him as such. But the Jews felt no need for an additional prophet and did not accept his offer. That is when he turned virulently against them.

We already know from Christian history how deep such a hatred can become, and the same pattern played out in Islam, with greatly varying levels of intensity. According to the Arabic biographies, during Muhammad's own time it was particularly bad. It has fluctuated ever since. Now, with the establishment of an independent Jewish state in the heart of the Middle East, it is as bad as ever.

The Christian and Islamic stories shed light on each other. Christianity and Islam both owe their existence to Judaism. In each, the story of the Jewish people is a core part of its narrative. Christians have incorporated the Jewish scriptures into their own Bible. And the Qur'an recounts in detail the Jewish story as recorded in those scriptures. Moses is by far the figure most mentioned in the Qur'an, more than Muhammad or any other prophet. Without the Jewish story the Qur'an would hardly exist.

The continued existence of Jews and Judaism thus poses a problem for both later religions. For Christianity, the persistence of Judaism as a legitimate path to God put into question the need for Christ's sacrifice. Therefore Christianity had to delegitimize Judaism, which led eventually to the dehumanization of Jews. In Islam it was similar. The persistence of Judaism as a great monotheism but without Muhammad put into question Muhammad's prophetic vocation. So Judaism too had to be delegitimized. And as happened with Christianity, in the most extreme forms of Islam, which we see today especially in Palestinian and Iranian culture, Jews had

to be dehumanized. As the Hamas charter says, “Israel, Judaism and Jews challenge Islam,” and that challenge calls for a radical solution.

Both Christianity and Islam have, in essence, said to Jews: Your story is our story now, and we are more faithful custodians of it than you. In both unreformed Christianity and unreformed Islam we find this dynamic: the Jews rejected the true new messenger of their faith – Jesus in Christianity and Muhammad in Islam – and so set themselves up in opposition to God. The rejection of God’s messenger puts Jews on the side of evil, and makes persecuting them a meritorious act in the sight of God. And so the young terrorist could actually believe he was doing God’s will by killing Jews and bragging to his parents about it, making his parents proud.

Muslim attitudes toward Jews, while for the most part negative, were not always this extreme. While Islam did consider Jews poor interpreters of their own scriptures and having fallen away from the truth, for the most part it did not see Jews as carriers of metaphysical evil. Some scholars maintain that this changed during the nineteenth century, largely due to Christian influence. Thus leading into our own time, Muslim antisemitism seems largely to have followed the Christian pattern.

And so this is how the pattern has worked, in both Christianity and Islam:

- There is a new revelation, based upon that given to the Jews.
- Jews do not accept this new revelation.
- Jews have always turned away from the truth. They even admit it in their own scriptures.
- Their own prophets condemned them, so they killed their own prophets (Acts 7:52, Qur’an 2:61, 2:91). They are faithless, devious, and treacherous.
- Therefore God has rejected them.
- And since rejected by God, they are less than fully human. It is meritorious to reject what God rejects, and to hate what God hates.

This is the classic dynamic in Christian antisemitism, and it operates just as forcefully in the most conservative forms of Islam practiced by Hamas, Hezbollah, and those in the Muslim community whose anti-Jewish attitudes are strongest. Unfortunately, it is very widespread, so much so that it needs to be called out as a serious issue.

We've spoken above about "unreformed" Christianity and Islam. Christianity did reform – partially. Not the great "Reformation" begun in the sixteenth century – in some important ways, and certainly in relation to Jews, it represented a giant step backward. The true Christian reformation happened after the Holocaust, when many Christians' consciences were shaken by the realization of the great extent to which Christian antisemitism contributed to that catastrophe. To be sure, that reform process never completed, but it was a big step forward. Islam, however, has not reformed beyond the efforts of isolated individuals sincerely working to define a more humane and inclusive form of their faith. Such ideals have yet to be adopted in the Muslim world as a whole, and so Jews remain demonized in the eyes of millions of Muslims. And so the mass demonstrations of Muslims around the world supporting and celebrating the appalling atrocities Hamas committed against Jewish civilians should not come as a total surprise.

Before ending it is important to call out a key misconception. Some are defending Hamas violence by calling it "resistance." "What do you expect?" they say, "This is what resistance looks like." Resistance to what? That is rarely stated explicitly; the hearer is expected to fill in the blank. One might think, "resistance to the occupation." Occupation of what? Hamas plays a nasty word game with this word.

First, as to Gaza, it is no longer occupied, and has not been since 2005. And yet some still call Gaza an "open-air prison." This rhetoric might refer to the blockade, which was made necessary by Hamas continuing to import materials for war, and which has not been very successful. The situation is unfortunate, and of course an end to the blockade is desirable. That could come about if Hamas would cease its aggression against the Israeli civilian population. The current conflict is uncovering the extent of Hamas's diversion of badly needed resources to its war effort. Case in point: before the first ceasefire, Hamas rocket fire from Gaza diminished to barely a trickle. The ceasefire was called to allow humanitarian aid to come in, but right afterward the rocket fire resumed full force. So where did all that

needed “humanitarian aid” go? Hamas also built an enormous and highly expensive network of tunnels large enough to drive vehicles through, with full electricity and elevators. How might the lives of Gazans be different today if all that money and material had been devoted to building a functioning society instead of hating Jews?

So does “occupation” refer to the West Bank? The West Bank is still occupied, which is unfortunate. But ending the occupation now, with Hamas still intact and the antisemitic hatred it represents shared by many in the general population, would most likely mean another state controlled by Hamas penetrating into Israel’s heartland. It would be a death sentence for Israel.

But notice Hamas never mentions the West Bank. That is not what Hamas means by “occupation.” Both in its charter and in its current rhetoric, Hamas means *the entirety of the State of Israel*. Hamas calls *all* of Israel “occupied territory” and *all* Jewish inhabitants of Israel “settlers.” Were the occupation of the West Bank to end tomorrow, Hamas would not be mollified. Hamas’s program is nothing less than a genocidal war against the State of Israel. The term “occupation” should not be used to disguise that fact.

So where do we go from here? Hamas is not a victim; it is an agent. Gaza is already a de facto state, with its own government and army. Yet Hamas has successfully sold its narrative of victimhood to much of the world. As long as that continues, the conflict probably will be endless. Hope may rest in the efforts of people of good will on both sides – and there are many in both the Muslim and Jewish communities. Each needs to recognize and value the humanity of the other. And at least in principle, it must be granted that both Jews and Palestinians have a right to be where they are and to have their national aspirations respected. Even though a Palestinian state may not be a viable prospect under present conditions, at least *in principle* each side must recognize the right of the other to exist. This, coupled with true religious reform, may make a two-state solution possible in the future. But it would have to be in an entirely different world from the one we are living in now. May we only survive until such a world becomes possible.

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