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May 18, 2008

## The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism: A review essay

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*The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism: From Sacred Texts to Solemn History*

Edited by Andrew G. Bostom  
Amherst, N. Y. : Prometheus Books, 2008

Were Jews living in Islamic societies victims of antisemitism? If so, to what extent? How did conditions for Jews in the Moslem East compare with those in Christian Europe? Is Islam intrinsically antisemitic? Are today's Moslems more antisemitic than those of the past and if so, why? These questions have been the subject of vigorous discussion over the past few decades.

Andrew Bostom's new book, *The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism: From Sacred Texts to Solemn History*, brings massive evidence to show that Jews suffered greatly in Moslem societies due to an antisemitism intrinsic to the Moslem religion. In this he goes against the commonly held belief that Jews under Islam suffered relatively little for being Jewish and that Islam itself is relatively tolerant, ideas put forward by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment as part of their battle with the Catholic Church, by Jewish historians who contrasted a mythical Muslim past with their own lachrymose conception of the history of their own people in Christian Europe and by contemporary historians of Islam, many of whom tend to view Moslem antisemitism through rose-colored glasses.

*The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism* is a large collection of a broad range of readings from a paragraph to several pages in length, smoothly joined together by Bostom's own writing. Included are the portions of Islamic scriptures relating to Jews, writing of Moslem scholars, preachers and rulers, writing of Jews who lived in Moslem societies and the reports of Jewish and gentile visitors to Moslem societies as well as writing of Western scholars who have studied various aspects of the experience of Jews in Islam.

The fact that Bostom's is a collection of direct quotations allows it to convey emotional tone far better than the usual scholarly writing where the author's impartial academic voice predominates. Travelers, diplomats and alien residents over the centuries have expressed emotions of sympathy, indignation and compassion regarding the situation of the Jews of Islam which academic authors are reluctant to employ. From their writing we learn telling details of the Jewish condition. For example a Christian traveler in Persia describes a Jew (who by Moslem law has no right of self defense) pleading with a Moslem who is beating his son to beat him instead.

A broad survey, Bostom's book informs readers about an area of history unfamiliar to most. Whereas readers will know of many cases of persecution of Jews in Christendom (the Crusades, the expulsion of the Jews from England, France, various German states and Spain, the Inquisition, the Chmielnicki massacres, the Kishinev pogroms, the Dreyfus Affair and so on), few will be able to point to similar occurrences in the history of Jews under Islam. Bostom fills in the canvas of such events.

One might have heard of the 1839 forced conversion of the Jews of Meshed, Iran (one of the four examples of Muslim persecution of Jews mentioned in the approximately one half page devoted to the subject in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica's* 72 page article on "anti-Semitism") but know nothing of the 4,000 Jews killed in Moslem riots in Grenada in 1066, the 6,000 Jews massacred in Fez in 1033, the hundreds of Jews slaughtered in Muslim Cordoba between 1010 and 1015, the Almohad depredations of Jews and Christians in Spain and North Africa between 1130 and 1232, the 1834 pogrom in Safed where raging mobs killed hundreds of Jews, the 1888 massacres of Jews in Isfahan and Shiraz Iran, the oppressive conditions imposed on Jews in Hamadan Iran in 1892, the 1910 pogrom in Shiraz, the pillage of the ghetto of Fez Morocco in 1912, the pillage and destruction of the Casablanca ghetto in 1907, the 1679 expulsion of 10,000 Jews of Yemen to the unlivably hot and dry Plain of Tihami from which only 1,000 returned alive in 1680.

One might have heard of the 1941 pogrom in Iraq but be unaware of the 1291 pogroms in Baghdad and its environs.

Readers will be familiar with the Koran's description of Jews as descendants of apes and pigs but probably not be aware of numerous other ugly and antagonistic references to Jews in Islam's sacred writing: that Jews are the greatest enemies of Islam, that Jews are associated with Satan, the Jews killed Mohammad, that the Jews falsified their sacred books in order to expunge all references to Mohammad and more.

One might know that under Islam's rules dhimmis (Christians and Jews) are not allowed to ride horses but be unfamiliar with numerous other restrictions, limitations, humiliations, indignities and abuses they prescribe: the poll tax (*jizyah*) required from each dhimmi and paid in a manner calculated to demean the payer, the dress codes that enforce on dhimmis undignified attire, the compulsory wearing of a colored patch of cloth to identify the wearer as a Jewish or Christian dhimmi, the requirement to address Moslems with honorific terms, the denial of the right of self defense against attack by a Moslem and more.

It is fairly well known that before Israeli rule of the Old City of Jerusalem it was common for Jews coming to pray at the Western Wall to be pelted with stones by Moslems. From Bostom's book one learns that throwing stones at Jews was common throughout the history of Islam, as was spitting upon them, hitting them, and pulling their beards.

Bostom's book is part of an ongoing debate about the comparative situation of Jews under the crescent and the cross. In this debate Bostom is in sharp disagreement with Bernard Lewis, the well known and much quoted authority on the history of Islam. Lewis has written:

"On the whole, in contrast to Christian anti-Semitism, the Moslem attitude toward non Moslems [including Jews] is not one of hate or fear or envy but simply contempt."

"Jews of Christendom suffered incomparably greater persecution [than the Jews of Islam]. Persecution, that is to say violent and active repression was rare and atypical. Jews and Christians [dhimmis] under Moslem rule were not normally called upon to suffer martyrdom for their faith."

"They [the Jews] were not often obliged to make the choice which confronted Muslims and Jews in reconquered Spain, between exile apostasy and death."

How is it that Lewis and Bostom evaluate Islamic antisemitism and the experience of Jews living in Muslim societies so differently, given the fact that though they might disagree on a few particular points of fact, the body of information they begin with is essentially the same?

Bostom's picture of Moslem antisemitism is much more somber than Lewis's. One source of difference lies in the fact that compared with Lewis's his writing includes considerably more detail of the anti-Jewish elements in Islamic religion, culture and history. By quoting the words of Jews who lived under the Muslims and non-Moslems visiting their lands, Bostom's text conveys emotions of sympathy and indignation regarding the oppressed condition of Jews which Lewis's academic, non-emotional style largely omits.

The structure of Lewis's and Bostom's arguments are also quite different. Employing a genetic approach, Bostom shows that Islam's holy books, the Koran, the hadith and the sira all have sharply negative things to say about Jews, that these have been emphasized and reinforced by Moslem thinkers, jurists and preachers throughout the history of Islam, and that the attitudes and ideas engendered by them have directly influenced the actions of Moslem rulers, clergy and mobs both in their oppression of Jews as dhimmis and their aggressive excesses against Jews which have included pogroms, forced conversion, pillage and expulsion. The status of dhimmi to which Jews and Christians are relegated under Islamic law is one entailing serious suffering and indignity in the best of circumstances. Frequently circumstances were far from the best.

Lewis puts Islam's record regarding Jews in a favorable light mainly with the generalizations he makes rather than the particular facts he marshals. These generalizations, which crumble under the slightest scrutiny, are of four general types. One holds that the least onerous version of Moslem oppression is typical of Moslem practice [Lewis writes "dhimmitude was a minor inconvenience Jews learned to live with ...under Muslim rule the status of dhimmi was long accepted with gratitude by Jews." In making this improbable claim he gives no evidence or explanation. Could he mean that the Jews were grateful for not being killed?]

A second type of generalization claims that the worst of the behavior of Christians towards Jews was the norm. ["Jews of Christendom suffered incomparably greater persecution (than Jews of Islam). Persecution (under Islam), that is to say violent and active repression was rare and atypical. Jews and Christians (dhimmis) under Moslem rule were not normally called upon to suffer martyrdom for their faith. ...They (the Jews) were not often obliged to make the choice which confronted Muslims and Jews in reconquered Spain, between apostasy and death." Besides employing a peculiarly narrow definition of "oppression" which excludes all disabilities of dhimmitude, Lewis implies that Jews in Christendom were often obliged to suffer martyrdom for their faith or make a choice "between apostasy and death" -- both of which are simply untrue.]

A third variety of generalization employed by Lewis claims that Muslim abuses are far less bad than the worst imaginable abuses by non-Moslems.["Dhimmitude involves some rights...and is surely better than no rights at all. It is certainly preferable to the kind of situation that prevails in many states at the present time where minorities and for that matter where the majority enjoy no civil or human rights." Offering no evidence or examples, Lewis writes as if there is any place on Earth where the majority of residents have "no rights at all."]

A fourth type of generalization ascribes to "human nature" rather than Islam, with no basis of evidence, the unattractive characteristics exhibited by Moslems [After describing the intense anti-Semitism in the Arab world today Lewis tacks on the generalization that "No people is immune from the universal disease of ethnic or social hostility and the Arabs are no exception. Obviously Arabs are *as liable* (my italics) as Germans, Russians or Jews or anyone else to develop hostilities against other peoples; and their history and literature bear ample witness to this." Lewis's suggestion that hatred is a trait shared by all peoples equally -- Germans, Russians and Jews, Britons, Italians, Canadians, Australians -- as if raging mobs, as familiar in the annals of Moslem history as to today's television viewers, are typical of all peoples; as if hate filled speeches by clerics are common in all religions; as if survey statistics of harbored hatred are not vastly higher among Moslems than among others; as if Moslem converts to Christianity do not regularly report their revulsion at the hatred which saturates the Moslem religion with which they were familiar. Replace Moslems with Danes, British, Russians Jews, Brazilians, Japanese or whoever and imagine, if you can, raging mobs rioting and killing over a newspaper cartoon.]

In addition to his generalizations Lewis employs clever reasoning to arrive at conclusions that are at least semantically if not in substance favorable to Islam. To reach the conclusion that Moslems were not until recently "anti-Semites" he begins by stating that

"anti-Semitism" [has] "hitherto been regarded as a specifically Christian disease - a certain attitude to Jews arising from the gospel narratives of the foundation of the Christian faith"

and goes on to say

"...anti-Semitism [is] a hatred which is unique in its persistence, its universality, its profundity and above all its theological and psychological origins.... In what follows the term anti-Semitism will be limited to ...that special and peculiar hatred of Jews which has its origins in the role assigned to Jews in certain Christian writing and beliefs concerning the genesis of their faith, and which has found modern expression in such works as the *Protocols* and similar portrayals of a universal Jewish plot against both God and mankind. In this special sense anti-Semitism did not exist in the traditional Moslem world."

Does this mean there was not hatred of Jews in the traditional Moslem world? Not at all. Lewis writes regarding Arabs during World War II:

"the Nazi war against the Jews won enthusiastic support ...Hatred was deep and violent, and expressed in the strongest language, but it was still in the main traditional rather than anti-Semitic in its terms."

Does this mean the emotion driving the plundering, expulsions, forced conversions and slaughter of Jews in the "traditional Moslem world" was not hatred? Although an unwary reader might get the impression that the answers to these questions is "yes" a reading of Lewis's words and a moment of thought should make it clear that the answer to both is "no."

How does Lewis reach the conclusion that anti-Semitism is unknown to classical Islam? He defines "anti-Semitism" as hatred of Jews according to Christian doctrine, not simply hatred of Jews. In doing so he distorts the ordinary meaning of "antisemitism" which in contemporary English means hatred of Jews.

There is a natural tendency for readers engaged with a text of history to seek a distillation of the author's conclusions set off from the mass of details of his work. The reader feels gratitude toward the author who summarizes his conclusions and hands them to him, so to speak, on a silver platter. Bernard Lewis is such an author. Unfortunately his conclusions are quite disconnected and even contrary to the details of his writing.

This said, Lewis's writing about Muslim and Jews should not be dismissed. Key to his thinking is the idea, which seems reasonable enough, that in recent years Arab Moslem hatred of Jews has become especially widespread and intense. Lewis holds that in the past Moslems scorned Jews as dhimmis but that now they hate and fear them in the manner of the worst of the Jew haters in the Christian West. In this context Lewis's writing about Jews and Moslems can be understood as an appeal to what he calls "the Arab intelligentsia" to bring forth an Emile Zola who will raise his voice against anti-Semitism as the French Zola [Lewis supposes] did at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, and turn back Muslims from a headlong rush toward the kind of Jew hatred that came to dominate German minds in the Nazi era. Seen in this light Lewis's writing about Jews in Islam is a call on Moslems to return to their better selves, to their old ways in which Jews were dhimmis worthy of scorn, but not devils worthy of destruction.

Lewis dates the turning of Arab Muslims from the old ways when Jews were scorned as dhimmis to a new white hot Jew hatred in which Jews are seen as devils to the Suez campaign of 1956 and the Six Day War of 1967. He explains this new Arab antisemitism as resulting from Israel's overwhelming military victories against Arab armed forces. According to traditional Arab thinking Jews are cowardly dhimmis, not fighters. Yet they had crushed Arab armies. The only explanation, Arabs came to believe, was that Israel must have benefited from a world-wide Jewish conspiracy of the kind put forward in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Although Lewis's dating of the Moslem/Arab turn toward white hot hatred of Jews would seem to be correct, his explanation is partial at best.

If the 1956 Suez campaign was a military defeat for Egypt, it was a political defeat for France and massive political defeat for Great Britain at the hands of the United States, both of which would have profound and long lasting effects. The Suez campaign was the outcome of a scheme Great Britain, France and Israel planned and executed without informing the United States. The plan called for Israel to attack Egypt and for France and Britain to demand an end to the fighting, quickly bring in troops to separate the two sides and thereby regain control of the Suez Canal. Israel aimed at gaining the use of the Canal allowed it by international law but denied it by Egypt. France and Great Britain aimed at regaining control of the Canal which Egypt, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, had taken from them. The American response to the French, British and Israeli scheme was immediate and furious. President Dwight D. Eisenhower demanded that France, Britain and Israel desist immediately (which they did). The Soviets, then in the process of crushing the Hungarian uprising, threatened to rain atomic bombs on Paris, London and Tel Aviv.

For France the Suez debacle had the effect of greasing the skids of its negotiations with Germany which until then had been dragging. The outcome of these negotiations was the Treaty of Rome which produced the European Economic Community, precursor to the European Union, and the enduring partnership of France and Germany. For Great Britain it marked the beginning of its turn away from its "special relationship" with the United States and towards partnership with France and Germany in the enterprise of transforming Europe into a single political entity.

If for Britain, joining the EEC and the European project was a great transformation, for France the project of creating a "united states of Europe" in partnership with Germany was one of resuming an undertaking begun in the 1920s but stymied at the time by the opposition of Germany which, while favoring the creation of single political entity of Europe, preferred to accomplish the deed by itself. Only with its defeat in 1945 did Germany give up its ambition of unifying Europe on its own and view the project as a joint one in which leadership would be shared with France.

Since the end of the eighteenth century one element of all projects to unify Europe -- Napoleon's, Kaiser Wilhelm II's and Hitler's -- was to form an alliance with the Arab Moslems against the leading naval/commercial power. The post-World War II European project which produced the EEC and the EU has been no different. Now, though, instead of Great Britain being the target of a united Europe allied with Arab Muslims as it had been in the time of Napoleon, Wilhelm II, and Hitler, Britain's foreign policy elite decided that it should be part of that united Europe.

The post-World II alliance of "Europe" and Arab Moslems is known as "Eurabia." Promoting it has been one of the main activities of the European Union and its leading members. As in the past the Europe-Arab alliance is seen by its "European" promoters as a means of attacking the world's leading naval/commercial power which now happens to be the United States. An important weapon in this attack is propaganda promoting hatred of Israel and the United States. Such propaganda is directed from within the foreign ministries of the European states and distributed through media which are still mainly national. An innovation of recent times is that the European Union itself, operating through a broad range of well-funded of

educational, academic, cultural and political projects, is a major promoter of anti-American and anti-Israeli propaganda.

Lewis recognizes the influence of European propaganda directed towards Arab Moslems has had in the past in promoting hatred of Jews. "Nazi Germany," writes Lewis, "from 1933 to 1945 devoted considerable effort to wooing Arab opinion. These efforts were very successful at the political and strategic levels in mobilizing Arab support against the common enemies, the Western democracies and the Jews." Similarly an understanding of Arab hatred of Jews and Israel in the Cold War period must give considerable weight, as Lewis does, to the role of Soviet propaganda. Yet neither Bostom nor Lewis mention the role since the 1960s of European propaganda promoting the EU's Eurabia project and influencing Europeans, Middle Easterners and others to hate Israel and the United States.

*The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism* provides a broad history of the darker side of the Jewish experience in the lands of Islam and the ideas and beliefs which guided Moslem attitudes towards Jews. In this the book brings to light a little known and largely misunderstood area of history and provides an important corrective to the skewed interpretation common among scholars of Islam who, for whatever reason, feel they must put a positive spin on what is essentially negative history.

Today's Moslem/Arab hatred of Jews and Israel is not adequately explained as either a product of traditional Moslem anti-Semitism which Bostom has documented or Bernard Lewis's New Moslem anti-Semitism which takes as its foundational text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. A proper understanding of the sources of Arab/Moslem attitudes today must take into account recent European influence in molding Middle Eastern minds as it did in the Nazi and Cold War periods which themselves were similar in this regard to the eras of Napoleon and Kaiser Wilhelm II.

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