
A Remorseless Apology

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

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386 pages.*

Reviewed by Boaz Neumann

From the Israelis' point of view—and most Jews would probably agree—Holocaust denial is the worst of all possible affronts. Not only was the Holocaust an unspeakable tragedy for its victims, a catastrophic event whose memory remains fresh in our collective consciousness. For many, both in Israel and abroad, the Holocaust is perceived as the *ultima ratio* of the State of Israel—even if, from a historical standpoint, Zionist activism preceded it by several decades.

This reductive cause-and-effect may explain the prevalence of Holocaust denial in Muslim countries. After all, recognition of the Jewish people's darkest hour of suffering would make the sweeping rejection of Zionism

somewhat difficult. Clearly, it's much easier to dismiss the entire matter as a monstrous sham. And there's no need to go all the way to Tehran to come across this kind of thinking: In May 2009, sociologist Sammi Smooha of the University of Haifa published a survey showing that 40 percent of Israeli Arabs believe—or at least claim to believe—that the Holocaust never took place. In this case, at least, it's hard to attribute the findings to ignorance or indoctrination: The respondents all studied in Israeli schools, and were well acquainted with the subject. The only plausible explanation for their position, then, is a deep-seated animosity toward the Jewish state and its founding narrative.

The powerful emotions evoked by the Holocaust make the raging “war of narratives” between Israelis and Arabs particularly explosive, and a challenge to scholars attempting to confront the topic in depth. Gilbert Achcar, a scholar of Lebanese descent and a lecturer at the School for Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, has nonetheless decided

to take on the formidable task. Given his previous publications and radical political activism, Achcar is clearly unafraid to tackle controversial issues. In 2006, together with Noam Chomsky, he wrote *Perilous Power*, a harsh indictment of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and in 2007, in collaboration with Israeli activist Michel Warschawski (Mikado) of the now-defunct Marxist Revolutionary Communist League, he published a book on the last IDF campaign in Lebanon, titled *The 33-Day War*. His most recent work, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, deals with an even more explosive topic, and seeks to refute certain views that consistently crop up in the heated debate surrounding it. This is certainly a worthy endeavor, but Achcar's arguments are bound to infuriate readers expecting a fair—or, at the very least, honest—discussion of such a sensitive issue.

Achcar's book is divided into two parts. Part I, "The Time of the Shoah," discusses Arab reactions to the rise of modern European antisemitism and the appearance of Nazism. Significantly, Achcar emphasizes that one can speak not of a single reaction, but rather of reactions, since the Arab world does not constitute a monolithic entity. He rightly points out that this world is a complex and

layered realm that engendered various responses to the Holocaust, each of which calls for a separate discussion. Nevertheless, Achcar identifies four fundamental positions that existed side by side throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and that shaped the Arab attitude toward antisemitism, Nazism, and the Holocaust: the Western-liberal approach, the Marxist perspective, the nationalist view, and, finally, the fundamentalist, pan-Islamic ideology.

Arab adherents to the Western-liberal approach renounced European antisemitism almost categorically, and completely rejected National Socialism. Their vehement opposition to Zionism stemmed not from animosity toward the Jews, but instead from an anti-colonialist stance. Arab liberals held that there was no reason Palestine's Arabs should have to pay the price for the persecution of Jews in Europe; one injustice should not be corrected by bringing about another. Some went so far as to show solidarity with the oppressed Jews in the name of universal human values, seeing in Nazism a far greater threat than even Zionism.

Arab Marxists tended to identify Zionism—which they perceived as a form of fascism and racism—with Nazism. The comparison between the two movements was predicated

not only on the familiar arguments of orthodox Marxism, but also on a series of so-called proofs: Zionism and Nazism both believed in the existence of a distinct Jewish *volk*; during the initial years following the Nazis' rise to power, they maintained contacts with the Zionists, liaisons that culminated in the Haavara (Transfer) Agreement of 1933; and, finally, certain right-wing Zionist circles even expressed sympathy—albeit short-lived—for Italian fascism. Still, Marxist Arabs renounced antisemitism, particularly since some of their associates were themselves Jews who spoke out strongly against Zionism.

Arab nationalism, by contrast, took the opposite approach. The nationalist parties that popped up in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon during the 1930s were directly inspired by the fascist movements of Europe. Indeed, they sought to imitate them: the Syrian Social-Nationalist Party, founded in 1932, was a Lebanese replica of the Nazi Party; the Lebanese Phalanges, founded by Pierre Gemayel in 1932, were modeled on the Spanish Falanges; and the Young Egypt Party, formed in 1933, operated a youth movement called the Green Shirts—a local version of the German *Sturmabteilung* (Stormtroopers).

Nonetheless, Achcar claims, Arab nationalist sympathy for Nazi

Germany was motivated not by an ideological affinity, but rather by the expectation that the Third Reich would prove an ally in the struggle against the despised Britain and France. Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Aali al-Gaylani asked for German and Italian assistance after he was deposed in January 1941 only because he was an anti-imperialist who sought to halt the British takeover of his land. Meanwhile, Young Egypt activists, including future president Anwar Sadat, were anxiously waiting for Rommel, who was then racing toward Cairo; from their perspective, he was not a representative of Nazism, but rather a savior, who would liberate Egyptians from the yoke of British occupation.

In a similar vein, Achcar claims that antisemitism was not a substantial component of Arab nationalism. Anti-Jewish sentiment originated, in general, in the hatred of those foreign forces that had taken over Arab lands, of which the Zionists were but one of many. Indeed, the Independence Party (al-Istiqlal) of Palestine, which was formed in 1932 and led the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, saw the Mandate government as its main adversary; the conflict with the Zionists was merely part of the larger campaign against the British.

Pan-Islamism, which emerged as a political force with the rise of the

Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, was characterized from the very beginning by extreme anti-Zionism, to which caustic antisemitic elements were added during the 1930s. The theologians and preachers of radical Islam could not outright adopt the Nazi doctrine, whose precepts were foreign to their own. Yet they were certainly sympathetic to Hitler's Germany, which they perceived as an instrument in the service of Allah. They hoped it would fulfill the divine mission of eradicating all infidels—including, obviously, the Jews.

The second and more developed half of the book, "The Time of Nakba," focuses on the period after the founding of the Jewish state. Here Achcar attempts to analyze the Arab perception of the Holocaust, primarily the ways in which it changed in response to the Palestinians' national tragedy in 1948. He claims that during the 1950s, the Arabs by and large came to recognize the great catastrophe that befell the Jews, even as they rejected the notion that this disaster justified the Zionist endeavor in general, and the crime of the "Nakba" in particular. The Arab attitude changed, however, as the Holocaust began to assume a central role in Israeli ideology. The enormous dissonance between the Jewish state's growing military might and the rhetoric of victimhood it adopted—the Israeli invasion of

Lebanon in 1982 is a prime example of this phenomenon—only strengthened the Arabs' suspicion that the Zionists were blatantly manipulating the historical record. Their empathy for the suffering of the persecuted was thus replaced by a refusal to accept the "Jewish version" of the Holocaust, or even the very fact of its occurrence. The military and diplomatic conflict between Israel and the Arabs now came to encompass another struggle: a bitter "war of narratives."

Achcar's book makes a worthwhile contribution to both the historical and historiographical discourse surrounding the question of Arab attitudes toward the Holocaust. In the heat of the controversy over the issue, many scholars end up spouting clichés; Achcar makes a commendable effort to avoid falling into that trap. For instance, he refutes, convincingly, the static and homogenous image of the "Arab world," portraying it instead as a complex tapestry made up of many distinct threads, each subject to change over time. Achcar also shows how the different positions taken up by Arabs as a response to European antisemitism and the Holocaust were informed by disparate motivations. At times they are driven by pure ideology, at times by realpolitik considerations, and at times by simple ad-hoc opportunism.

Yet *The Arabs and the Holocaust* is first and foremost an exercise in apologetics. This fact is readily apparent not just in the book's contents, but also in its tone. In many places, for example, Achcar strays from a captivating historical discussion to indulge in arcane, tedious jousting with other scholars, quoting the objects of his criticism at length. Moreover, he displays an unfortunate tendency to append to the names of the researchers he quotes descriptions that fit his assessment of them. For example, Achcar has harsh words for Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, whose 2009 book *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust* addresses the same topic, albeit from a more critical angle. He makes a point of reminding the reader at every turn that the authors are a pair of "Israeli academics affiliated with Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies," a clear hint that the integrity of their work is compromised by their place of employment. (Full disclosure: I, too, am a faculty member of the Department of History at Tel-Aviv University.) On the other hand, when he mentions the controversial Israeli thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and his opprobrious description of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as a "Judeo-Nazi" policy, Achcar describes him as an "eminent scholar and philosopher."

A more substantial—and fatal—flaw is Achcar's historiographical framing of his analysis. In the first few pages, Achcar declares that the formative moment in the history of Zionism, and especially that of the State of Israel, was the Nazi rise to power in 1933. He bases this claim on demographics: While from 1882 to 1931 a total of 187,000 immigrants arrived in the Land of Israel, from 1932 to 1948 more than 313,000 Jews "poured into the country," including some 80,000 Holocaust survivors. In 1932, Jews accounted for 18 percent of the population, whereas by 1946 that figure had shot up to 35 percent. Based on this dramatic increase, a direct result of the persecution of the Jews in Europe, Achcar concludes that the Zionist state owed its creation to the Holocaust.

Now, the selection of these periods as historically significant is not, in and of itself, illegitimate. Achcar can, for example, claim that the Holocaust began in 1933; a fair number of historians—Israelis among them—hold similar views. But other approaches are also worthy of note: Many scholars, for instance, believe the Holocaust began at the earliest in the late 30s, if not the early 40s. If they are right, this greatly weakens Achcar's thesis regarding the Holocaust's demographic "contribution" to the Zionist enterprise. Regrettably,

instead of backing his argument with a serious discussion of the pertinent research and alternative perspectives, he cleaves to a single, limited, and problematic possibility, merely because it supports the claim that Nazism, the Holocaust, Zionism, and the soon-to-be Jewish state are inextricably intertwined. It goes without saying that in doing so, Achcar categorically overlooks the fact that the Zionist project got its start not in the 1930s, but at least five decades earlier.

Achcar's political leanings also color his methodology, unintentionally doing an injustice to the Arabs themselves. While the Zionists (like the Western colonialists) are presented in the book as active historical subjects, the Arabs generally appear as passive objects. Indeed, in the few instances in which they are described as having acted, as opposed to having been acted upon, Achcar uses various exercises in apologetics to explain their choices. It is in this vein that he presents Arab antisemitism as merely a faded imitation of the European original, and a reaction to foreign aggression. Until the West's violent intrusion into the region, Achcar explains, the Jews were treated with tolerance and respect by their Arab neighbors. It was only after the arrival of the colonial powers that relations between the Muslim population and the Jewish minority, which adopted

Western mores, soured. In the early 1920s, tempers flared even more on account of the national dispute over the question of Palestine; from there, the situation only deteriorated.

Achcar describes at length the West's and the Zionists' brutal treatment of the Palestinians. On the other hand, he barely makes any mention of Arab violence, let alone of the Palestinian sort. True, he devotes several paragraphs to the Farhud, the infamous Iraqi pogrom of June 1941, but attributes the bloodbath to a handful of agitated marauders, insisting that most of the Arabs in the area objected to the massacre, and came to the Jewish victims' aid. (The fact that similar mayhem took place throughout the Arab world during this period seems to have slipped Achcar's memory.) Unfortunately, Achcar employs a different standard when it comes to violence by Jews, refusing, for instance, to acknowledge that the massacre perpetrated by the militant Zionist groups Etzel and Lehi against the Arab village of Dir Yassin was an act by a minority. To his credit, he does quote historian Benny Morris, who notes this was not a crime on the scale of Srebrenica. Then again, did anyone think otherwise?

But by far the most blatant instance of methodological distortion is Achcar's portrayal of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Muslim clergyman

who led the Palestinians during the British mandate. He opens the eyebrow-raising discussion with the claim that al-Husseini's historical significance has been blown way out of proportion in an attempt to position him near the top of "contemporary demonology's hit parade." In truth, argues Achcar, Amin al-Husseini was never a particularly important or accepted leader; rather, he was the handiwork of British colonialism. As evidence, Achcar reminds us that al-Husseini was appointed mufti of Jerusalem in 1921 by none other than High Commissioner Herbert Samuel, a Jew and a Zionist who was among the "architects" of the Balfour Declaration. This, Achcar stresses, was just one of a series of controversial appointments that divided the Palestinian public and prevented it from creating its own authoritative and unified leadership. True, Achcar does not point explicitly to "a British-Zionist conspiracy," but it is clear that he wishes his readers to reach certain conclusions on their own.

Though appointed to his post by the Mandate government, Haj Amin al-Husseini was not exactly an exemplar of cooperation. The British initially tolerated his concerted anti-Jewish activities, but their patience wore thin when he stood at the vanguard of the Great Arab Revolt of 1936. The murder of the district

commissioner of the Galilee, Lewis Yelland Andrews, in September 1937 was the last straw. The British authorities' attempts to arrest the mufti failed, and merely helped glorify him among Palestinians. Al-Husseini fled the country and, following a failed coup d'état against the British in Iraq, took refuge in Germany. The romance between him and the Third Reich, which had begun to bud in 1933, now burst into full bloom. The Palestinian leader took an active part in Nazi propaganda, even helping form Muslim units in his patron's service. Achcar merely emphasizes that these units were generally small and peripheral, certainly in comparison to the number of Arabs recruited into the British Army.

But the apologetics don't stop there: Haj Amin al-Husseini's request that the Nazis block Jewish immigration to Palestine was perfectly reasonable, says Achcar, since it reflected the Palestinian interest; what made this demand illegitimate was only the fact that it was directed toward the Nazis rather than the British. It's a questionable argument, to say the least. The mufti was well aware of the destruction of European Jewry, which Achcar readily acknowledges. Regardless of who was shutting the doors to refuge, the result would have been the same: a death sentence for millions of Jews.

Indeed, the mufti was not satisfied merely with a request to close the gates of Palestine to European Jews. He also implored the Germans to send them to the death camps in Poland. Achcar is unable, and therefore does not try, to defend al-Husseini on this point. Indeed, he states explicitly that the Palestinian leader's conduct was abhorrent. However, quoting from the mufti's memoirs, he accepts the latter's explanation that collaboration with Germany was carried out only in order to bring about the demise of Zionism. Haj Amin al-Husseini, Achcar writes, "was telling the truth when he said that he did not embrace National Socialist doctrine." It remains unclear what Achcar is trying to achieve with this gratuitous interpretation. Even if there is something to it, and the mufti really wasn't beguiled by Nazi ideology, but merely a loyal servant of Hitler's regime—even then, what difference would it make?

Likewise, Achcar bends over backward when explaining the conduct of another present-day Islamist, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In Part II of the book, he analyzes Ahmadinejad's position vis-à-vis the Jews, breaking it down into three fundamental claims: First, the Holocaust is a myth. Second, Holocaust deniers have the right to express their opinion, and it is morally unacceptable for the West to silence them. Third,

and finally, even if the Holocaust did occur, Muslims were not responsible for it and should not have to pay the price for it; the obligation to compensate the Jews for the injustice done to them rests on the shoulders of Europe alone. Based on the third argument, Achcar concludes that Ahmadinejad is not a Holocaust denier in the strict sense—at most, he sees it as "unconfirmed hypothesis"—but rather a provocateur, trying to strip away the mask of Western hypocrisy. This conclusion begs the question: What does the author of *The Arabs and the Holocaust* stand to gain by defending a man who doubts that the Jews were the victims of genocide, and in the same breath threatens to condemn them to a similar fate?

I'm convinced that Achcar is familiar, to a certain degree, with the history of Zionism and of the State of Israel. Yet although he presents a nuanced and sophisticated depiction of Arab conduct, he refuses to do the same for the Jews. Of course, Achcar has the right to hold anti-Israeli views—which he indeed articulates throughout the book—but the account he sets forth is flagrantly biased. He portrays Zionists as war criminals who unleash their wrath on Arabs because of the suffering the Germans brought upon the Jews, and the Palestinians, in turn, as victims of Israelis—and indirectly of the Nazis

as well. One side invades, occupies, and slaughters ruthlessly; the other is pushed into a corner, defends itself, and fights to restore its lost honor. But a serious scholarly work cannot sketch such a slanted and simplistic portrait.

The book ends in an unexpected, even bizarre way. The concluding chapter opens with a quote from Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*:

Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed.... And in this it is not likely that all are mistaken; the conviction is rather to be held as testifying that the power of judging aright and of distinguishing truth from error, which is properly what is called good sense or reason, is by nature equal in all men; and that the diversity of our opinions, consequently, does not arise from some being endowed with a larger share of reason than others, but solely from this, that we conduct our thoughts along different ways, and do not fix our attention on the same objects.

Achcar readily embraces Descartes' praise of reason, and expresses his own hope that this commonality will enable Arabs and Muslims on one hand, and Israelis and Jews on the other, to overcome the national, religious, and ethnic barriers that currently divide them. This optimistic conclusion to such a morbid book seems almost detached from reality. After all, Achcar has just described, over hundreds of pages, the venomous hatred, the antiquated views, and the fanatical ideologies that have rendered the Israeli-Arab conflict an open wound that won't stop bleeding. Is "common sense" enough to put a halt to all this? Perhaps it would be best, for now, to aim for a more modest goal: a commitment to the truth.

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