



Beyond the Mufti: Arabs, Palestinians, and the Holocaust

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Like many historians, my eyebrows went up when I heard the comments of Israel's prime minister ascribing to the former Mufti of Jerusalem responsibility for convincing Hitler to exterminate, rather than just expel, Jews. I do not know if Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu misspoke, exaggerated, or willfully rewrote history. I do not know if, as some pundits suggest, he was "crazy like a fox," purposefully stretching history so he could plant in people's mind the connection between Palestinians and the Holocaust and stir a debate that would leave a lasting impression. I can tell you what I wrote a senior Israeli government official hours after Netanyahu's remarks were reported:

"As the author of a book on Arabs and the Holocaust, I urge you to have the PM tone down his focus on the Mufti as the source of Hitler's extermination policy. The Mufti was an evil SOB but, in any operational sense, a fairly marginal actor in the Holocaust. The Nazis didn't need any help from Arabs in figuring out whether and how to kill Jews. And while the Mufti's virulent anti-Jewish ideology has had long-term impact in corners of the Middle East, especially (but not solely) among Palestinians, it actually had little direct impact on thinking among Arabs at the time, despite the best efforts of Nazi radio and propaganda. There is no benefit in inviting the critique of serious Holocaust historians, who -- to be polite -- do not universally share the Prime Minister's views on the issue."

While I thought the tempest would soon fade away, after a little while, I realized that there could be more to this story -- not so much in dissecting the prime minister's words but in using this as a learning moment. The Holocaust is bandied about so much as a political metaphor in the Middle East these days that perhaps, I thought to myself, this could be an opportunity to inject some real history and some firsthand experience into the discussion -- history of what role Arabs really did play in the Holocaust and firsthand experience of what it means to be an Arab today who wants to learn firsthand what the Holocaust was all about.

Nearly a decade ago, I wrote a book on the roles that Arabs played in the Holocaust -- good, bad, and in between -- and was fortunate to partner with MacNeil/Lehrer Productions in making a documentary based on the book that aired nationally here in the United States on PBS on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) in 2010. I am privileged to have as a partner at The Washington Institute my friend Professor Mohammed S. Dajani, a Palestinian scholar who appreciates the importance of learning what the Holocaust was all about and who has paid a great personal price for his efforts. Four years ago, we together wrote the

International Herald Tribune op-ed you have before you -- "Why Palestinians Should Learn about the Holocaust." And today, we want to take the opportunity of this moment to tell our stories.

Two weeks ago, I moderated a Policy Forum here at the Institute on Israeli-Palestinian violence and showed the crowd a copy of the 1924 pamphlet by the Supreme Muslim Council, then headed by Hajj Amin al-Husseini, which stated that the fact that the al-Aqsa Mosque was built on the site of Solomon's Temple was "beyond dispute." We know, of course, that many Palestinian leaders today dispute what was then beyond dispute. My point was not to highlight the cynicism of contemporary leaders, though that is surely true. My point was to underscore the fact that the way things are -- and the way things are understood to be -- is not the way they always were. Yes, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have disagreed and even fought over Jerusalem for hundreds of years; but it is only recently that they disagreed about the history. That fight today reflects a contemporary political dispute, not a millennial dispute about religion, God, or belief.

So too with the role of Arabs in the Holocaust -- real flesh-and-blood Arabs, not just the cartoonish character that Hajj Amin has become in popular imagination. There was, of course, a kernel of truth in what the prime minister said -- Husseini was a virulent anti-Semite, and his legacy and his views still resonate today in some corners of both Palestinian and wider Arab politics. But, contrary to conventional wisdom, Husseini is not a widely venerated figure in Palestinian political culture. One way to measure this is to assess his place in the popular imagination of Palestinians, as represented by the extent to which he is memorialized in public space. I asked my outstanding research assistant, Marina Shalabi, to look at how many public memorials -- schools, statues, streets, etc. -- are named for Husseini compared to other Palestinian historical figures. The results are interesting. Yes, he does have a profile -- but not very high. It is no surprise that Yasser Arafat's is orders of magnitude greater. Interestingly, even someone like Dalal al-Mughrabi, one of the terrorist perpetrators of the Coast Road massacre, which left dozens of Israeli civilians dead in 1978, is represented several times as often as Husseini. Ironically, Husseini appears in Palestinian public memorials with about the same frequency as Issam Sartawi, the PLO activist assassinated by radicals in 1983 for advocating coexistence and dialogue with Israel. It is quite provocative to think that the extreme Jew-hater Husseini is remembered in Palestinian public space as often as a Palestinian killed for advocating coexistence.

Distortion of history extends to our understanding of the roles that Arabs played in the Holocaust, the subject of my remarks. Contrary to popular belief, Arabs were involved in virtually all aspects of the Holocaust -- as perpetrators, bystanders, and protectors of Jews. This did not happen in Palestine, governed at the time by the British. It did not happen in Syria, which the Free French took from Vichy fairly early in the fighting of World War II. In Iraq, the *farhud* (a sudden pogrom launched against the Jews of Baghdad in early June 1941) was a terrible, bloody event, one that Hajj Amin and others may have inspired, but here one needs to inject some historical accuracy to note that the *farhud* occurred when Britain was in control of Baghdad, not the pro-Axis Rashid Ali -- in fact, British forces were positioned outside the city and let the rampage happen, doing nothing to stop it.

The part of the Arab world, if I can use that phrase, where the Holocaust was experienced in every manner but one -- that is, no mass extermination -- was in North Africa. For three years -- from May 1940 through May 1943 -- all or part of this territory was governed by fascists -- the Vichy regime in Morocco and Algeria until November 1942; Mussolini's Italy controlling Libya until early 1943; and Tunisia, which was under Vichy control until November 1942 and then direct German control until liberation in May 1943. Indeed, Tunisia was the only Arab country to have a full-fledged German occupation.

Across North Africa, the half-million Jews of these countries suffered discrimination; incarceration; hostage-taking; looting; and loss of jobs, homes, property, and education, with tens of thousands stripped of citizenship and thousands more sent into forced labor and slave labor, where many were tortured in the most inhumane

ways conceivable. The especially unfortunate were killed. Much of this happened in the more than 110 sites of slave and forced labor in these Arab lands.

Just to give you a sense of how committed the Nazis were to extend the Holocaust to Arab lands, we only have to remind ourselves of the story of Tunisia. For several months of the war, this African country was the most important territory in the European front, where the Nazis never controlled more than one-third of the country, where they were subjected to Allied bombing raids day and night. And still, Hitler sent to Tunisia the SS, headed by Col. Walter Rauff, the evil genius who developed the mobile death gas vans in Europe that killed thousands, in order to begin the process of hostage-taking, mass roundups, terrible labor camps, and executions. If the Germans were not turned back at al-Alamein, the long-term goal was to exterminate the Jews of Tunisia, Egypt, and eventually of Palestine too.

Thankfully, extermination never happened. Why? The answer is very simple -- the war ended in most of North Africa in November 1942 and conclusively in May 1943. And sending the Jews across the Mediterranean to Germany to be killed before then was a very risky and difficult proposition -- though there are examples of the Nazis flying Jews from Tunisia to Dachau and on to their death.

What role did Arabs play? The answer -- every role. The largest percentage were bystanders, of two sorts. Many just wanted to survive in very tough times. Others played no direct role in the persecution of Jews but were cheerleaders for the persecution.

A minority -- though a regrettably large minority -- were perpetrators. These were translators, guides, guards, and others -- the essential participants who made the trains run on time. Without the role of these Arabs, the Germans, French, and Italians would never have been able to go door to door to round up Jews, operate the labor camps, or manage confiscated Jewish property. Some were high politicians and officials; others were petty low-level workers. But across the region, in every way, Arabs participated.

And then, there were the rescuers. I am not just talking about the ones who showed kindness toward Jews. I am talking about Arabs who risked their lives to protect, rescue, or save Jews from persecution or death. I tell the stories of several in my book, principally (though not solely) from Tunisia. In the film, I tell stories of several more. All in all, I believe the percentage of "righteous" among the Muslims of North Africa was essentially the same as among the Christians of Europe. If, after seventy years, Yad Vashem has identified 25,600 righteous for the 6 million Jews killed, then I believe for the 4,000 or so Jews killed in North Africa, the percentages of righteous are at least the same.

Why don't we know these stories? Why especially don't we know the stories of rescuers? The reason is twofold: on the one hand, we -- Jews, Israelis, Western historians -- didn't look very hard; on the other, they -- the Arabs -- didn't want to be found.

How does this connect with the Al-Aqsa/Temple Mount issue that triggered this episode? Let me tell you the story of Si Ali Sakkat, the former mayor of Tunis, who retired to a country home in the Zaghuan Valley, about thirty-five miles from Tunis. Just a half-mile away from his property was an Axis labor camp, where about sixty Jews were interned. This was also the scene of heavy fighting in the spring of 1943. In the heat of the fighting, the Jews escaped and made their way to the large wooden gates of Si Ali's compound, looking for shelter. Si Ali had to make a decision -- let them in or keep them out? He didn't know who was going to win the war, so it wasn't an easy choice. But he made a quick decision. He opened the gates and provided food and shelter to all the escaped Jews until the end of the fighting. We know this story from testimonials written by Jews at the time, published in wartime histories of the Tunisian Jewish community.

But then the story takes a turn. I tracked down the grandsons of Si Ali Sakkat to ask them about this story. They were pleased to hear of their grandfather's exploits but, to my surprise, they explained that the story they tell in their family was very different. In their telling, Si Ali didn't extend hospitality and shelter to Jews escaping from the Germans but to German POWs who escaped from the Allies!

This is very illustrative -- there is not a single shred of evidence to suggest that Si Ali opened his farm to the Germans, while there are testimonies from the protected Jews certifying that he did provide shelter to them. My explanation is that sometime in the past seventy years, history was twisted and distorted, the same way that sometime in the past ninety years the recognition of the Jewish historical connection to the site of al-Aqsa was twisted and distorted. These are political acts, done for political purposes. Unraveling them is our collective responsibility.

This is the lesson of the joint op-ed that Professor Dajani and I wrote about the urgency of Palestinian education on the Holocaust. The point there was to underscore the fundamental difference between the Holocaust and the Nakba, the term Palestinians use for the "catastrophe" of Israel's creation. Among the many differences one can point to, this fundamental difference is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a political conflict that has a political resolution, via negotiations; in contrast, it would be bizarre and even ludicrous to think of the Holocaust as soluble through "Nazi-Jewish negotiations." To make this statement is not to deny human tragedy or negate the real and legitimate sense of loss felt by many Palestinians as a result of the conflict with Israel. But it is important to put each of these events in its proper historical context; blurring one into the other only reduces the uniqueness of the inhumanity of the first and transforms the second from "difficult" to "insoluble."