

Abbas and the Khazar Claim: Separating Myth from Fact

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Brief Analysis

The lesson of this current episode with Abbas should be that more research is called for to throw light on this half-forgotten chapter of history to refute such claims. Only more accurate information can help remove the Khazars from the shadows of mystery and antisemitism and place them instead in the correct historical context.

Chairman Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority has now publicly raised a long discarded historical claim used to deny Israel's right to exist, a right recognized by his predecessor Yasser Arafat as a key component of the Oslo Accords thirty years ago. In an August 24 speech to Fatah's Revolutionary Council convened in Ramallah, Abbas asserted that Ashkenazi Jews—whose ancestors led the Zionist drive to establish the Jewish state—are not the descendants of the ancient Hebrew tribes, the Children of Israel of the Old Testament, and therefore have no claim to the contested land.

While also claiming that Hitler killed the Jews “only because they dealt with usury and money,” Abbas adopted the academically refuted theory that European Jews originated instead a millennia ago from the Khazar Empire located in contemporary southeastern Europe, whose royal dynasty and aristocracy are reported by medieval sources to have converted to some form of Judaism. “The truth that we should clarify to the world is that European Jews are not Semites. They have nothing to do with Semitism,” he declared. “The story began in 900 CE, in the Khazar Kingdom on the Caspian Sea. It was a Tatar kingdom that converted to Judaism. [In the 11th century], this empire collapsed, and all its population fled to the north and to the west. They left for Russia and Western and Eastern Europe. There they spread, and are the forefathers of Ashkenazi Jews.”

Raising this issue signals that Abbas is backing down from Arafat's letter to Prime Minister Rabin of September 9, 1993, four days before the signing ceremony at the White House, and is stepping up his rhetoric to delegitimize the

very essence of Jewish links to the Holy Land. Arafat's letter stated that "The PLO recognizes the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security... PLO affirms that those articles of the Palestinian Covenant [1968] which deny Israel's right to exist, and the provisions of the Covenant which are inconsistent with the commitments of this letter are now inoperative and no longer valid." Such claims are not new—indeed they have a pernicious history of their own—but separating myth from fact when it comes to the Khazars is key to delegitimizing this claim.

It should be noted that Abbas has his facts about the Khazar empire wrong: the Khazars were not Tatars—rather they were a Turkic people—and their conversion took place, according to most historians, sometime between 740 and 865 CE. His Prime Minister, Muhammad Shtayeh, also had his dates wrong when **declaring** (<https://www.memri.org/tv/palestinian-prime-minister-mohammad-shtayyeh-israel-jews-khazars>) on June 26, 2021: "Present day Jews are Khazar Jews, who converted to Judaism in the 6th century." Regardless of the historical inaccuracies about the Khazar dynasty itself, both statements are instead the product of a more recent and dangerous historical trend, reviving the case offered by the late Syrian president, Hafez al-Assad, against the justification of a Jewish homeland. These assertions follow in the vein of numerous Arab writers who have produced a number of volumes over the past five decades identifying the Ashkenazi communities as refugees from the destruction of the Khazar Qaganate by Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev c.965 CE.

Promoting this narrative has not just been the effort of Palestinian and Syrian politicians; many Egyptian, Saudi, and Lebanese intellectuals have also been drawn to a narrative that deprives contemporary Jews of pre-medieval Jewish lineage and history connecting them back to the land. Books dealing with the subject are still on sale all over the region and these theories are widely available across the internet.

This approach is deeply rooted in a widely popular theme of Soviet anti-Semitism, prevalent in many of the institutions where a number of Arab intellectuals studied. In a state where history became subservient to the reigning ideology, Soviet historians depicted the conversion of the Khazars as a humiliation of the Russians, poisoning their values and beliefs and sowing corruption in society. In a famous article published in *Pravda* (1951) under the pseudonym "Ivanov"—posited to be Stalin himself—an argument was put forth that it would be "shameful" to accept that a Jewish empire governed the vast area between the Caspian and the Black Seas before the appearance of the early Russian princes. This became the official interpretation of the Khazars, mixing dangerously with contemporary accusations of a "Jewish nationalistic plot." Abbas would have acquainted himself with these concepts while writing his Holocaust-denying Ph.D in Moscow twenty years later.

In practice, such claims linked the Russian Jewish community to a past deemed ignoble by the state while dampening serious academic research on this topic even today. Excavations in Khazar sites were prohibited; findings were stored in museum cellars, never to be displayed or were described as relating to other cultures, oftentimes preventing later research into their actual beliefs and societies. The main Khazar fortress of Sarkel was drowned under an artificial lake on the Don river. And the race to discover the legendary Khazar capital Itil believed to be somewhere in the Volga Delta (or sunk under the water of the rising level of the Caspian) is now mostly undertaken by "unofficial" archeological teams. Meanwhile, large amounts of artifacts from graves (Kurgans) are smuggled to western Europe for private collections.

Some unscholarly publications by Jewish writers with non- or ex-Zionist arguments have also had significant influence in promoting the view that Ashkenazis have Turkic rather than Jewish roots. Foremost among them is still Arthur Koestler's *The Thirteenth Tribe* (1976) and more recently, to a much lesser extent, Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2008). In the Arab world and especially among Palestinians, these controversial publications were perceived as an admission among some Jews that the argument has its merits.

But from an academic standpoint, the theory that European Jewry is an offshoot of the converted Khazars has been repeatedly rejected by **comprehensive genetic studies**

[\(https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1336798/\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1336798/) as well as linguistic research. As for the connection between the Khazars and Judaism, historical documentation traces a flow of Jews—not of Turkic origin—from the Byzantine Empire to the Khazars’ famously tolerant domains because of religious persecution. And as for conversions, the greatest scholar of early Russian history, the late Omeljan Pritsak from Ukraine, reached the conclusion that at most just 30-40,000 Khazars may have converted. Such a number could not explain the rapid growth of east and central European communities. Moreover, archeological evidence connecting the Khazars to Judaism is exceptionally thin. Except for a few tombstones with Menorah imprints in Kerch, Crimea, and Taman peninsula, no Jewish traces have been found in Khazar domains. The origin of coins found in Sweden with the words “There is no God but Allah and Moses is his envoy,” used to link Khazars to a conception of Judaism, are still under debate among academics.

Instead, much of the connection between Khazars and Judaism comes from medieval documents originating from outside of Khazar lands. Well respected historians—notably professors Moshe Gil and Saul Stampfer—are of the opinion that the whole medieval literature concerning the purported mass conversion, both Jewish documents and Muslim travelers’ accounts, reflect uncorroborated fictional traditions or even fabrications and fantasies rather than the reality of the day. Of course, there are those who cannot ignore the substantial body of evidence indicating that some Khazars chose to practice a form of Judaism. On the other hand, there is no doubt, for example, that Muslims were the majority in Itil and constituted the main military force of the Kagan.

The breathtaking story of the Khazar Empire, which has fed the imagination of generations of Jews searching for a model of sovereignty and sparked furious indignation in Russia, is again being employed as a political weapon: a pseudo-historical explanation why Israel should not exist. Unfortunately, in Israel itself, the historical nuances of this people are not taught in schools or in the academy. And in the Arab world, the myths surrounding the Khazars are used to emphasize, as [one Saudi columnist wrote \(https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/authors/2122\)](https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/authors/2122), that “Arabs and Jews are not cousins” and that “today’s Jews have nothing to do with Abraham.”

Meanwhile, the lesson of this current episode with Abbas should be that more research is called for to throw light on this half-forgotten chapter of history to refute such claims. More excavations are needed along with a fresh look at what has already been excavated. Only more accurate information can help remove the Khazars from the shadows of mystery and antisemitism and place them instead in the correct historical context. But whatever the historical reality, the Khazars are not related to the current conflict. Abbas has chosen to bark under the wrong tree. ❖

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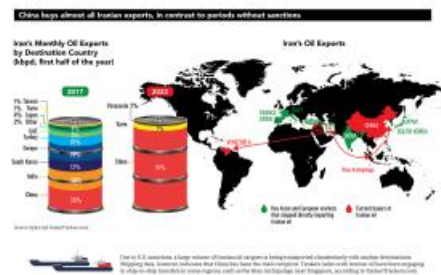
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