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ASSESSING HOLOCAUST DENIAL IN WESTERN AND ARAB CONTEXTS

GILBERT ACHCAR

The specificity of the type of Holocaust denial on the rise in Arab countries since the 1980s is explored in contradistinction to Western Holocaust denial. The latter, rooted in anti-Semitism, is a substitute for open hatred of the Jews in countries where this hatred has not been tolerated since World War II. Holocaust denial in Arab countries, on the other hand, finds its roots in Israel's exploitation of the Holocaust for political purposes. It also serves as a simplistic explanation for Western support of the Zionist state and as an outlet for frustrations created by Israel's oppressive supremacy.

THE PHRASE "Holocaust denial" has been given different meanings and used in various ways over the years. It needs therefore to be carefully defined before any discussion of the phenomenon. Basically, as the phrase indicates, Holocaust denial designates a variety of attitudes disputing established facts related to the genocide of European Jews perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II.

The most extreme form of Holocaust denial is, of course, the straightforward denial that any mass murder of Jews by the Nazis took place, the genocide being described accordingly as a "hoax," a "big lie," or a "swindle." The most widespread form, however, does not dispute that a large number of Jews perished during the war, but rather attempts to reduce that number from the generally acknowledged range of 5–6 million to 1 million or fewer. Moreover, Holocaust deniers often dispute the very nature of the massacre as an intentional genocide of Jews perpetrated by the Nazis. In such Holocaust-denial theories, the massive death of Jews in Nazi concentration camps was but the "natural" result of diseases such as typhus. These claims are in complete contradiction of the accounts of the genocide common to scholarly historiography.

In addition to these major forms of Holocaust denial, one also finds attitudes of essentially the same inspiration but that focus on particular political

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or “technical” issues related to the genocide instead of denying it head on. Such attitudes may touch on a range of topics, from Adolf Hitler’s personal responsibility to the specific techniques used by the Nazis in mass-murdering the Jews, the gas chambers in particular.¹

THE EMERGENCE OF HOLOCAUST DENIAL IN THE WEST

Early attempts to cast doubt on the truth of the Nazi mass extermination of Jews emerged during the genocide itself. In a sense, one could say that the first Holocaust deniers were the Nazis themselves, insofar as they took care to hide the genocide as they were committing it, and later to delete its traces. Nazi efforts in this regard facilitated Holocaust denial in the early postwar years.

The liberation of the camps by the Allies at the end of the war proved beyond rational dispute the reality of what many voices had denounced during the war. In November 1945, during the Nuremberg Trials of major Nazi war criminals, Austrian SS officer and historian Wilhelm Höttl reported a conversation he had with Adolf Eichmann, the infamous engineer of the mass deportation of European Jews to Nazi concentration and extermination camps. Eichmann told Höttl about a report he had sent to Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, who wanted to know the exact number of Jews killed by the Nazis. The figures in Eichmann’s report, according to Höttl, were approximately 4 million Jews murdered in the various death camps and an additional 2 million killed in other ways, most of them shot by the *Einsatzgruppen* (“special-operation units,” i.e., mobile killing units) during the campaign against the Soviet Union.²

Höttl’s testimony is the key source for the 6 million figure that has since become the most quoted estimate of the number of Jews who perished at Nazi hands during World War II. It was also the starting point for countless publications of all kinds pointing to apparent contradictions in diverse estimates of the number of Jews in Europe before and after the war. This type of sophistry was solidly refuted by the publication in 1961 of Raul Hilberg’s magisterial *The Destruction of European Jews*.³ Hilberg’s thorough and meticulously documented investigation established that the number of victims of the Jewish genocide was at least 5.1 million, an estimate deemed too conservative by other researchers whose approximations are closer to the 6 million announced at the end of the war. Since then, there has been an abundance of scholarly research and publications on various aspects of the Jewish genocide, to the point that the Holocaust is certainly the best documented mass-scale murder in history.

THE SPECIFICITY OF WESTERN HOLOCAUST DENIAL

And yet, the stream of articles, pamphlets, and books expressing various forms of Holocaust denial by numerous authors—most of them citizens of the

United States, Britain, and France—has continued uninterrupted, amounting to a veritable “Holocaust denial industry.” Taking advantage of the Internet, the “industry” has flourished extraordinarily in recent years. Electronic information and communication has made it much easier to reach new layers of readers, many of whom would not otherwise have been exposed to Holocaust denial. The Internet has also made it possible to transcend national borders and to penetrate countries where Holocaust denial is punishable by law, such as Germany, Austria, Poland, and France.⁴ A 2010 study of the phenomenon in the United States found “strong evidence to suggest that Holocaust denial has garnered an increasing amount of U.S. media coverage over the past decade and continues to grow in prevalence on the Internet.”⁵ The report makes a number of interesting observations, one of which has direct relevance to the main theme of this essay:

Holocaust denial on the Internet becomes an especially concerning problem when well-meaning people (possibly students or curious adults) search for the answers to straightforward, factual questions about the Holocaust and end up finding websites devoted to Holocaust denial. . . . Nearly twenty-six percent of those who viewed the site dedicated to [famous Holocaust denier] Ernst Zundel found the page by searching “victims of the Holocaust.” . . .

The search term “Israeli crimes against humanity” was the fourth highest rated search term driving traffic to [Holocaust-denying website] The Campaign for Radical Truth in History, an indication that a large number of people searching for an anti-Israel or more anti-Semitic [*sic*] subject found a website devoted to Holocaust denial in the process.⁶

What is extraordinary about Holocaust denial, however, is not the sheer size of the “industry” (though it is incomparably vaster than any other systematic enterprise aimed at denying an historical event) but the motive for the denial. A comparison with the second most important instance of genocide denial in history, the denial of the Armenian genocide, is telling in this regard. Armenian-genocide deniers usually try to bring down the number of Armenians who died in the Ottoman Empire during World War I to about 500,000 from scholarly estimates generally ranging from 1 to 1.5 million. Their main thrust, however, is to deny the genocidal intention of Ottoman authorities, and to present the vast number of Armenians who died from 1915 onward as victims of interethnic violence and of war-related conditions affecting all communities.

The primary driver of Armenian-genocide denial is the Turkish state and Turkish nationalism. It is motivated not by ethnic or religious hatred of the Armenians per se but rather by nationalist concerns. In contrast, the hugely larger extent and reach of the denial of the Jewish genocide is unmistakably rooted not in Nazism or German-Austrian or any other form of nationalism but in anti-Semitism as a particularly rabid strain of xenophobia—the hatred of otherness—nourished by centuries of harsh discrimination and oppression

wreaked by Christian Europe against the Jews. In fact, the distance between the established and commonly acknowledged historical facts of the Jewish genocide and the theses of their deniers is of such a magnitude that it leaves the latter no room for any explanation other than conspiracy.

Indeed, at the core of Holocaust denial lies, inevitably, “conspiracy theory”—the most fantastic ever devised: the anti-Semitic theory of the “international Jewish conspiracy” plotting to run the world and extort funds from the Gentiles. Holocaust denial postulates that the Jewish genocide as commonly perceived is nothing but a “fraud” concocted and promoted by “the Jews”—or the “international Jewish lobby,” or “the Zionists” (a term that in such instances serves as a code name for the Jews)—in order to control the rest of the world through moral blackmail playing on Western guilt. Holocaust denial, then, is necessarily based on a deep hatred of the Jews, albeit sometimes (poorly) hidden under feigned empathy. Typical deniers, for example, after asserting that the true number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust does not exceed a few hundred thousand, would add hypocritically, “To be sure, that is still a huge crime.”

Western Holocaust denial is thus a modern camouflage for anti-Semitism, a stratagem adopted to get around the fact that overt anti-Semitism has been stigmatized in the West ever since World War II. It is a response of hard-core Western anti-Semites to times of adversity, to an epoch in which they feel ostracized and defeated, believing that “the Jews are running the world.” Unable to eliminate physically the object of their hatred, present-day anti-Semites compensate for their impotence by resorting to symbolic violence in the literal sense of using violence against a *symbol*. The Holocaust is that symbol: in disputing its reality, the deniers aspire to inflict maximum moral pain on the Jews while at the same time explicitly or implicitly propagating their international Jewish conspiracy fantasies among non-Jews. Like witch doctors with voodoo dolls, the deniers inflict violence on a symbolic figure representing the Jews, or more specifically, the memory of the Jewish genocide. In this way, Holocaust deniers symbolically offset their latent desire to physically annihilate the Jews by attacking their most painful remembrance, thereby becoming “assassins of memory,” in the apt phrase of the late Pierre Vidal-Naquet.⁷

HOLOCAUST DENIAL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Recent decades have seen the growth of a specific brand of Holocaust denial, the locus of which is not the West, as with ordinary post-World War II Holocaust denial, but the Middle East. Although the organizations that monitor the regional occurrence of such expressions are Zionist, and therefore far from unbiased, there is no point in “denying the denial” that exists in the Middle East. Even when the source is as patently prejudiced as the U.S.-based Anti-Defamation League, a statement such as “since the 1980s, Holocaust denial has become increasingly popular in the Middle East”⁸ would not be

disputed by any objective observer of the region. Similarly, the authenticity of the Holocaust-denying passages extracted from publications as well as television and radio broadcasts monitored in the Arab world and Iran by the Israeli propagandist Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) is not in doubt. Still, the nature of such monitoring materials requires qualification. To quote from my recent book:

That undertakings of this sort no more reveal the “Arab attitude” than they do “the reality of the Arab world” does not mean that those who compile them invent the quotations they proffer. What they do is put manifestations of the regression on prominent display, while often taking them out of context; selected, assembled, and concentrated in a single stream, these exhibits project a deliberately distorted image of the Arab world’s intellectual production. Nevertheless, as long as one keeps in mind that this material is being used for propaganda purposes, these collections may be treated as so many early warning systems: scanners that reveal the lesions in the Arab media.⁹

It also needs to be said that denial in the Middle East is much less the object of an “industry”—with the exception of the systematic Holocaust denial enterprise set up in Iran at Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s instigation with governmental support—than the expression of incredulity or skepticism regarding the truthfulness of the Western account of the Holocaust. There is seldom any attempt to substantiate the denial by the kind of pseudo-scientific demonstrations typical of Western Holocaust deniers. More fundamentally, contemporary expressions of anti-Semitism among Muslims and Arabs should not be conflated with expressions of age-old Western anti-Semitism. Their driving forces are qualitatively different. Indeed, the difference between the two brands of Holocaust denial is a function of the difference between the two brands of anti-Semitism. This last was accurately summed up by General Yehoshafat Harkabi, who headed Israeli army intelligence between 1955 and 1959 and later, after his retirement from the military, wrote a book on Arab attitudes toward Israel.

It should be stated with the utmost emphasis that Arab anti-Semitism is not the cause of the conflict but one of its results; it is not the reason for the hostile Arab attitude toward Israel and the Jews, but a means of deepening, justifying and institutionalizing that hostility. Its rise is connected with the tension created as a result of Zionist activity, and especially of the traumatic experience of defeat, the establishment of independent Israel and the struggle against her. Anti-Semitism is a weapon in this struggle. It is functional and political, not social: it presents the Jews mainly as a political, not a social threat. . . . Hence it describes the Jews, not as passive, shrinking parasites, but as aggressors. Unlike Western Christian anti-Semitism, it is not the result of generations of incitement which have created an archetype in the popular consciousness, although there are elements in Islam on which anti-Semitism could build.¹⁰

Putting something in context does not amount to justifying it; any fair ethical judgment not dealing in the absolute with categorical imperatives and divine commandments must take into consideration the circumstances surrounding the act being examined and the relative position of the actor, with special attention to the difference between oppressor and oppressed. Thus, the anti-Semitism of an Eastern European pogrom mob cannot, as a form of racism, be equated with the anti-Christian or anti-Gentile attitudes that may develop among Jewish victims of such anti-Semitism. Similarly, the anti-Jewish attitudes that may develop among Arab victims of Zionist oppression cannot be equated with Western anti-Semitism, or for that matter with the anti-Arab racism common to most Israelis, as documented by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel.¹¹

Thus, when Western Holocaust deniers disguise their anti-Semitism as anti-Zionism by claiming that the State of Israel is both a result of the Holocaust “swindle” and a major perpetrator of that hoax, they are seeking to hide their anti-Semitic motivation behind a veil of legitimate protest against the oppression inflicted on Palestinians and Arabs by the Israeli state. For it is obvious that anyone truly motivated primarily by hatred of oppression would *a fortiori* empathize with the European Jews who, after suffering persecution and pogroms for centuries, were victims of the most formidable and systematic genocide of modern times. This logical inference escapes many people in the Middle East, where ignorance about the Nazi genocide of the Jews, in contrast to the extensive education and widely available information on the subject in the West, is widespread. This ignorance, moreover, is combined with a direct experience of Israeli oppression, or at least greater proximity to its main victims, resulting in a much sharper awareness and resentment of this oppression than exists in Western countries.

The belief by many Arabs that the Holocaust is a “myth” invented, fostered, and manipulated by the Zionists in order to coax the United States and Europe after the war into supporting their usurpation of Palestine, and thereafter to maintain their support for Zionist designs, belongs to the same logic that sustains the belief by many Arabs (though not necessarily the same Arabs) in the authenticity of the famous Russian anti-Semitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The rationale at work here is the search for a (simplistic) explanation of a fact otherwise difficult to fathom: the ongoing support for Israel by Western states in general, and the United States in particular, often at the expense of their own interests in Arab and Muslim countries.

The belief by many Arabs that the Holocaust is a Zionist “myth” invented to coax the West into supporting the usurpation of Palestine belongs to the same logic that sustains the belief that The Protocols of the Elders of Zion are authentic.

In their book on Arab attitudes toward the Holocaust, Tel Aviv University’s Meir Litvak and Esther Webman correctly state that the Russian forgery “acquired widespread popularity in the Arab world, as it provided a reasonable explanation for the Zionist phenomenon and its successes in the Middle

East."¹² If this is true for such an improbable document as the *Protocols*, a text hardly anyone in the West still believes to be authentic, it is all the more true for Holocaust denial, which is upheld by a continuing and expanding stream of literature in Western countries.

One thus finds among Arabs a continuum of stances inspired by conspiracy theory in order to provide explanations for the West's seemingly unconditional support for Israel. The stances range from crude to more sophisticated. At the lowest level one finds the conviction that the *Protocols* (averred to be authentic) provide the key. Moving up the scale are various renditions of Holocaust-denial claims, and from there to recitations of an omnipotent "Jewish lobby" dictating Western policies, and finally to more sophisticated versions attributing the direction of Washington's Middle East policy to the "Israel lobby."¹³

The degree of sophistication is not necessarily related to the level of education.¹⁴ Several times over the years I noticed the extent to which even educated people in the Middle East, as a consequence of a century of conflict with Zionism, can be ignorant when it comes to issues pertaining to Judaism. Thus, for example, a cultivated and urbane lawyer with whom I was once having a chat in Beirut defended in good faith the authenticity of the *Protocols* in order to explain Israel's perceived clout with Western powers. When I challenged his belief, he brought out the relevant volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* where, to his great surprise and embarrassment, he found my version of facts corroborated, and apologized for his ignorance.

Here lies another crucial difference between Arab and Western expressions of Holocaust denial. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theory in the West is no more than an instance of pathologic fantasy; the idea that "the Jews are running the world" is not founded on any sober factual observation other than, perhaps, the disparity in some Western countries between the proportion of Jews in the entire population and the proportion of persons of Jewish background in the power elite (however small their actual numbers may be). In contrast, conspiracy theory in the Arab Middle East—whether anti-Semitic or, most commonly, strictly anti-Zionist (i.e., making a clear distinction between Zionists and Jews)—confronts two very real facts: the regional military supremacy and domineering attitude of a Zionist state claiming to represent the "Jewish people" (and now even wanting the Palestinians and the Arabs to recognize it as a "Jewish state") and the near-unconditional support and complicity it enjoys from Western powers.

When it comes to Holocaust denial, the issue is further complicated by the indisputable fact that the Israeli state has resorted and increasingly resorts to the Holocaust to justify its acts and to deflect criticism from Western sources.¹⁵ This difference between Western Holocaust denial and its Middle Eastern counterpart has been effectively expressed by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, unquestionably one of the authors who contributed most to the castigation of Holocaust denial in general:

Concerning Israel, can one limit the debate [about the Holocaust] to history? The Shoah (Holocaust) exceeds it, first, by virtue of the dramatic role it played in the very origins of the state, then by what must indeed be called the daily use made of the great slaughter by the Israeli political class. The genocide of the Jews abruptly ceases being a historical reality, experienced existentially, and becomes a commonplace tool of political legitimation, brought to bear in obtaining political support within the country as well as in pressuring the Diaspora to follow unconditionally the inflections of Israeli policy. Such is the paradox of a use that makes of the genocide at once a sacred moment in history, a very secular argument, and even a pretext for tourism and commerce.

Need it be said that among the perverse effects of this instrumentalization of the genocide, there is a constant and adroitly fueled confusion of Nazi and Arab hatreds?¹⁶

Vidal-Naquet returns to this theme in a later text, further explaining the danger inherent in the Israeli instrumentalization of the Jewish genocide:

Many responsible Israeli politicians and, with them, many educators consider that the current war is the continuation of the genocide, and Arafat is the new pseudonym of Adolf Hitler, who also called himself Nasser in the fifties and sixties. At least they used to say that until the Oslo and Washington agreements.

If a stone thrown by a boy or girl from the Occupied Territories, if a bullet fired by a Palestinian guerilla, if even a bomb thrown at a bus by a Palestinian terrorist is the continuation of the genocide, the ineluctable result of this type of assertion is that some of those who think that the Palestinians have good reason to rebel will perfectly naturally think that the Shoah itself was not the terrifying tragedy that we know it to have been. Those who, in Israel or elsewhere, make political use of the Shoah, are running the risk of making this into not a historical truth, but a “political truth,” as the deniers’ sect puts it, in other words something which can be crushed by more incisive reasoning.¹⁷

ARAB DENIAL OF THE HOLOCAUST AND ISRAELI DENIAL OF THE NAKBA

Keeping these necessary prolegomena in mind, we can now turn to assessing the proliferation of Holocaust-denial expressions in the Arab Middle East over the last three decades. First, however, it is necessary to distinguish between two brands of Holocaust denial in the Middle East, one ideological and the other reactive—or, otherwise stated, between a *constitutive* Holocaust denial, in which the denial forms an essential element of an ideological construct about the Jews, and an *opportunistic* brand, in which it is fundamentally reactive and can be reversed with a change in circumstances.¹⁸

There are likewise two factors involved in the surge of denial in the Middle East. The first is the significant rise of Islamic fundamentalism, boosted by

the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, which became the main current expressive of popular anti-Western and anti-Israeli resentment in the Arab world following the discrediting of secular Arab nationalism in the 1970s. Of all major Arab political currents, Islamic fundamentalism is the only one to have imported and adapted major elements of Western anti-Semitism into its own discourse, and this since the 1920s and against the background of rising tensions in Palestine, as I have shown elsewhere.¹⁹ The growth of this political current from the 1980s onward was naturally accompanied by an anti-Semitic drift in anti-Israeli attitudes, as exemplified by the qualitative difference between, on the one hand, the discourse elaborated by the PLO since the late 1960s, with its clear distinction between Zionists and Jews and its clear repudiation of anti-Semitism, and, on the other hand, the 1988 Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), which included clear expressions of anti-Semitism and a direct reference to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.²⁰ This current is predisposed to adhere to Holocaust-denial attitudes as part of an incoherent, often contradictory, gamut of anti-Semitic stances.

The second factor, coincident with and contributing to the amplification of the first, is the continuous rightward drift of the Israeli society and polity, as exemplified in the increasing dominance since the late 1970s of the Zionist Right, the Likud.²¹ After its victory for the first time in the 1977 Knesset elections and its conclusion of a peace treaty with Egypt aimed at neutralizing that country by removing it from the Arab-Israeli confrontation, the Likud led a qualitative escalation in the type of wars waged by Israel. The 1982 invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut were followed by stepped-up settlement building in the Palestinian occupied territories and, especially in response to the outbreak of the first intifada in December 1987, a qualitative upsurge in Israeli violence. The only interruption in the Israeli drift to the Right was the 1992-95 interlude under Yitzhak Rabin, during which the Oslo accords were signed. The return of the Likud to power under Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 signaled unmistakably the end of the short-lived “peace process,” and Israel’s rightward drift resumed. By 2000, unprecedented settlement expansion and the collapse of the “peace process” led to the outbreak of the second intifada. This was soon followed by the election of Likud’s hard-line Ariel Sharon, the bloody offensive against the occupied territories as of 2002, the 2006 onslaught on Lebanon (which surpassed in intensity the 1982 invasion), and the 2008-09 onslaught on Gaza. In the course of these developments, the Israeli Labor Party, founder of the Israeli state, has fallen to fourth place among Israeli parties, while the two largest parliamentary groups—the Likud and its offshoot Kadima, founded by Sharon—are both heirs to Menachem Begin’s Herut legacy. The third largest Israeli party is led by Avigdor Lieberman, the current foreign minister, who openly advocates the “transfer” of Israel’s Palestinian citizens.

These facts require emphasis in order to counter the Western tendency, rooted in anti-Arab racism and identification with Israel, to focus on the dangers of the ideological drift toward Islamic fundamentalism among Arabs

while completely disregarding the far more worrisome ideological drift to the Right in Israel—more worrisome because it is represented at the helm of the most powerful state in the region, whereas its Arab counterpart has been mostly located in the opposition to existing governments until now. The Israeli drift to the right and its consequences have been decisive in the sharp exacerbation of tensions and hatreds in the Arab-Israeli conflict since the 1980s, which in turn has been decisive in the expansion of Arab expressions of Holocaust denial. In this latter regard, the most egregious and dismaying instance was when several Arab decision makers and a large segment of Arab public opinion rallied behind French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy after the banning in France of his 1995 book, *Les mythes fondateurs de la politique israélienne*.²²

The Israeli drift to the Right has been decisive in exacerbating hatreds in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which in turn has been decisive in expanding Arab expressions of Holocaust denial.

In point of fact, for most Middle Easterners who express such attitudes, Holocaust denial is not a component of a belief system incorporating major elements of Western anti-Semitism—as it is for Islamic fundamentalists—but is, rather, a gut reaction to the increasingly intolerable violence of Israeli oppression. This reaction is all the more predictable when the Israeli state, on the one hand, unscrupulously exploits the memory of the Holocaust in legitimizing its aggressive actions even as, on the other hand, it officially denies its responsibility for the uprooting, dispossession, and dispersal of the Palestinians in 1948. This denial of the Nakba (the “catastrophe”) is so thorough that Israeli authorities now forbid Palestinians from using the word in textbooks and punish commemorations of the event.²³ Even so, while accusing fingers are pointed at Arab expressions of Holocaust denial (in other words, denial of a genocide *perpetrated by others*), Israeli denials of the Nakba, an episode of “ethnic cleansing” *committed by the Israelis themselves*, are ignored.

Moreover, the Israeli state does not refrain from siding with deniers and perpetrators of other genocides, as has been acknowledged by Avraham Burg. After having served as chairman of the executive of the Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organization, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, and speaker of the Knesset, Burg reflected self-critically and courageously on the politics of his own country:

We have taken the Shoah from its position of sanctity and turned it into an instrument of common and even trite politics. We turned the Shoah into a tool at the service of the Jewish people. A weapon, indeed; mightier than the Israeli Defense Force itself. The Shoah has become our exclusive property.²⁴

We are on the side of the Turks in their denial of the Armenian Holocaust, and we are beside the U.S. right-wingers, not knowing anything about America’s original nations.

We supplied arms to those who perpetuated the massacres in Rwanda and our denial reaches inside the Balkans. . . . In this manner Israel isolated itself from profound world processes and became a denier of other peoples' holocausts.²⁵

AN ANTI-ZIONISM OF FOOLS

The clearest illustration of the fact that Arab Holocaust denial is primarily a gut reaction to increasing Israeli oppression and violence is found in polls carried out in 2006 and 2008 among Palestinian citizens of Israel for the *Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel*, published under the direction of Sammy Smooha of the University of Haifa and sponsored by its Jewish-Arab Center (JAC).²⁶ In 2006, 28 percent of those polled stated that they did not believe that millions of Jews died in the Holocaust. This is an astonishing figure, especially since the Palestinians in Israel, for obvious reasons, are certainly the Arabs best informed about the Holocaust.²⁷ However, these polling results could not be separated from the deterioration in the situation of the Palestinian citizens since the brutal repression of the mass demonstrations they held in solidarity with the Palestinians in the 1967-occupied territories at the start of the second intifada in October 2000, when twelve of their number were killed by Israeli police.

Two years later, in the second JAC poll taken in 2008, the proportion of Holocaust-denying answers leaped to over 40 percent. According to JAC's explanation of the 2008 *Index* results, "this is likely a form of protest rather than actual ignorance of historical events."²⁸ Sammy Smooha himself told *Ha'Aretz* that "this radicalization in the positions of Arabs was caused by a series of factors such as the Second Lebanon War, the stalemate in the negotiations with the Palestinians, the failure to implement the conclusions of the Or Committee [set up to investigate the October 2000 killings], closing the case against the Border Police troops who shot dead the Israeli Arab protesters in October 2000, and more."²⁹

There are no equivalent polls of Arabs at a regional level, but personal experience of the region gives a certain license for extrapolation. Thus, with the exception of hard-core followers of Islamic fundamentalist ideologies, expressions of Holocaust denial in the Middle East are likely to have the same motivations as those suggested by JAC concerning the attitudes among Palestinians in Israel. In other words, they are primarily a form of protest at Israel's increasing violence against the Palestinians and the Lebanese, its disregard for international law, and the impunity it enjoys. Unable to retaliate, they find in Holocaust denial an outlet for their impotent rage. It is the reaction of the weak in the face of the crushing superiority of Israel and its U.S. sponsor. Arab resort to symbolic violence in denying the Holocaust is thus a far cry from the reaction of frustrated anti-Semites in the West who regret the Nazi defeat sixty-five years ago.

Still, recognizing the profound difference between the Western and Middle Eastern brands does not diminish the self-defeating nature of Holocaust denial in the Middle East. Not only is Arab Holocaust denial completely ineffective against Israel, but it actually serves remarkably well the goals of Zionist propaganda, which uses such utterances as further confirmation of its depiction of Arab opponents of Zionism as anti-Semites. Thus, while Western Holocaust denial is as dangerous to Jews as any other form of anti-Semitic propaganda aimed at reviving mass anti-Semitism in the West, Holocaust denial in the Middle East is above all counterproductive.

In brief, Holocaust denial in the Middle East is most often an “anti-Zionism of fools” rather than an attitude stemming from true anti-Semitism. This does not mean that it should not be vigorously denounced and combated. The late Edward Said, who played an important role in undertaking this necessary task among fellow Arabs and Palestinians, wrote movingly in this regard.

All in all though, the sheer enormity of what took place between 1933 and 1945 beggars our powers of description and understanding. The more one studies this period and its excesses the more one must conclude that for any decent human being the slaughter of so many millions of innocents must, and indeed should, weigh heavily on subsequent generations, Jewish and non-Jewish. However much we may concur, say, with Tom Segev in his book *The Seventh Million*, that Israel exploited the Holocaust for political purposes, there can be little doubt that the tragedy's collective memory and the burden of fear it places on all Jews today is not to be minimized. Yes, there were other collective massacres in human history (native Americans, Armenians, Bosnians, Kurds, etc.). And yes, some were neither sufficiently acknowledged by the perpetrators nor adequately compensated. But there is no reason at all, in my opinion, not to submit oneself in horror and awe to the special tragedy besetting the Jewish people. As an Arab in particular I find it important to comprehend this collective experience in as much of its terrible concrete detail as one is capable: this act of comprehension guarantees one's humanity and resolve that such a catastrophe should never be forgotten and never again recur.³⁰

What is most remarkable in Said's statement is that he is not asking Arabs to recognize the enormity of the Holocaust for instrumental purposes, that is, as a more effective way to fight Zionism. He instead defines the recognition and comprehension of the Holocaust as a guarantee of one's humanity. Said fully understood, however, that moral superiority is a key element in the fight of the weak against the overwhelming physical force of their oppressors. The Holocaust has become indeed, and rightly so, a defining tragedy in the canon of contemporary universal ethics; its denial is a moral disqualifier.

ENDNOTES

1. On Holocaust denial, two Wikipedia pages, "Holocaust denial" and "Criticism of Holocaust denial," provide a useful starting point with a bibliographic orientation. A good overview of Holocaust denial, its history, and key arguments, along with their detailed refutation, is the book by Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman, *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?*, 2nd ed. updated and expanded (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). See also Deborah Lipstadt's older book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free Press, 1994). The sharpest and most perceptive writer on Holocaust denial is the late Pierre Vidal-Naquet (works quoted below), who was also a firm critic of Israel and a staunch supporter of Palestinian rights.
2. In his memoirs, Muhammad Amin al-Hussayni, the "Mufti of Palestine" who fled from the Middle East to Europe in 1941 and collaborated with the Axis governments in Berlin and Rome, related a conversation he himself had with Heinrich Himmler in the summer of 1943 during which the Reichsführer-SS told him confidentially that the Nazis were exterminating the Jews and had already killed 3 million of them. See Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust* (New York: Metropolitan, 2010), p. 152.
3. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961; 3rd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
4. See Raffi Berg, "The Fight against Holocaust Denial," BBC News, 14 April 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4436275.stm>.
5. Scott Darnell, *Measuring Holocaust Denial in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Policy Analysis Exercise, Spring 2010), p. 3, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/ocpa/pdf/HolocaustDenialPAE.pdf>.
6. Darnell, *Measuring Holocaust Denial*, pp. 38–39.
7. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
8. Anti-Defamation League, *Holocaust Denial in the Middle East* (New York: ADL, 2001), p. 2.
9. Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, p. 182.
10. Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes to Israel* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1972), pp. 298–99.
11. See the Association for Civil Rights in Israel's website, <http://www.acri.org.il/eng/>.
12. Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust* (London: Hurst & Co., 2009), p. 7. This assessment is confirmed by the fact that most Arab readers of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* believe that it is a Zionist document, a belief that is facilitated by the occurrence of "Zion" in the title of the Russian forgery (on this belief, see Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, p. 233).
13. See John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007). To be sure, Arab readers are rebutted by the two authors' insistence on their care for Israel's security and well-being. Most endorse nevertheless their assessment of the role of the lobby as it comforts their own search for a "reasonable explanation" for Washington's Middle East policy.
14. See footnote 27 below.
15. On the Israeli "instrumentalization" of the Holocaust, see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Owl Books, 2000), and Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
16. Vidal-Naquet, "Theses on Revisionism" (1985) in *Assassins of Memory*, p. 96; available online at www.anti-rev.org/textes/VidalNaquet85a/.
17. Vidal-Naquet, *Who Are the Assassins of Memory?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), available online at <http://www.anti-rev.org/textes/VidalNaquet92c/>.
18. I first applied this distinction to "demonization" at a recent seminar, "The Politics of Demonization," a symposium organized by the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism at Birkbeck, University of London, on 21 June 2011.

19. Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, chap. 4.

20. Text of the Hamas Charter in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 122–34. See especially articles 22 and 28, which echo the themes of the *Protocols*, and article 32, which makes direct reference to it.

21. Likud was formed in 1973 as a bloc of Herut, political successor to the terrorist Irgun Zvai Leumi, and several smaller parties. See, among several sources, Mitchell Cohen, *Zion & State: Nation, Class and the Shaping of Modern Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), and Colin Shindler, *The Triumph of Military Zionism: Nationalism and the Origins of the Israeli Right* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

22. On the Garaudy affair, see Litvak and Webman, *From Empathy*, pp. 340–50, and Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, pp. 258–62.

23. See “Israel Bans ‘Catastrophe’ Term from Arab Schools,” *Reuters*, 22 July 2009, and Rebecca Stoil, “‘Nakba Bill’ Passes Knesset in Third Reading,” *Jerusalem Post*, 23 March 2011.

24. Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust Is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 152.

25. Burg, *The Holocaust Is Over*, p. 171.

26. Links to highlights of the findings are displayed on Sammy Smootha’s Web page, <http://soc.haifa.ac.il/~s.smootha/page.php?pageId=166>.

27. The figure was even higher among high school and college graduates—33 percent.

28. University of Haifa, the Jewish-Arab Center, *Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel 2008* (Haifa: JAC, 2009; with added emphasis), http://jac.haifa.ac.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=33percent3Acan-the-crisis-be-overcome-arab-local-government-in-israel-at-the-beginning-of-the-21st-century&catid=7percent3Ageneral&Itemid=12.

29. Fadi Eyadat, “Poll: 40 Percent of Israeli Arabs Believe Holocaust Never Happened,” *Ha’Aretz*, 17 May 2009.

30. Edward Said, “Bases for Coexistence” (1997) in *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 206.