

# **The Holocaust & the Arab-Israeli War of Narratives**

Critical Dialogues with Gilbert Achcar



UNIVERSITY of  
**DENVER**

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JOSEF KORBEL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
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"This is a magisterial study of breathtaking empathy, examining one of the most emotion-laden topics with dispassion, sensitivity, and high erudition." —Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies, Columbia University

# THE ARABS AND THE HOLOCAUST

THE ARAB-ISRAELI WAR  
OF NARRATIVES

GILBERT ACHCAR

PICADOR



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## Introduction

# A Vexing and Emotionally-Charged Issue in Middle East Studies

*Nader Hashemi*

The Nazi Holocaust was the defining event of the 20th century for the West. The murder of six million Jews during World War II defies logical comprehension and eludes proper description. The concentration camps of Auschwitz, Dachau and Buchenwald have left a deep and indelible imprint on the collective consciousness of the West. When one thinks of pure evil, the images that immediately leap forward are those of European Jews, Nazi soldiers and barbed wire.

The Holocaust has become a reference point for all sorts of moral and philosophical reflection. It has influenced the evolution of human rights norms and international law. More broadly, the social sciences and humanities have been deeply shaped by the horrors of the Holocaust. Given the enormity of this event as a moral point of departure for any discussion of ethics or human rights, it comes as shock that well into the 21st century we still hear voices that seek to deny the historical truth of the Nazi Holocaust and its catastrophic impact on European Jews.

The region of the world where this denial is arguably most prevalent is the Middle East and the larger Arab-Islamic world.

Holocaust denial has been circulating in the Arab-Islamic world for decades. How can we explain this phenomenon? Where can we locate the roots of the problem?

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's former hardline president, never missed an opportunity to offend Western sensibilities by engaging in Holocaust denial. He seemed to revel in this role. But it would be wrong to limit Holocaust denial in the Middle East to one radical leader from one country. These repugnant views have been circulating in the Arab-Islamic world for decades, often with the blessing of various Middle Eastern governments. Sadly, these ideas have more currency across the region than most people care to admit. How can we explain this phenomenon? Is it merely a question of ignorance? Or is it a malicious sign of Islamic anti-Semitism? Where can we locate the roots of this problem?

To address these vexing questions, our Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver invited Gilbert Achcar, Professor of Development Studies and International Relations at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), to come discuss his book *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, a monumental study that contributes to two fields simultaneously: Holocaust studies and the intellectual history of the Arab-Islamic world. Professor Michael Marrus of the University of Toronto calls Achcar's book "essential reading for anyone who seeks a balanced understanding of the place of Jews and the Holocaust in Arab thinking today." Professor Rashid Khalidi of Columbia University calls *The Arabs and the Holocaust* a "magisterial study," a work of "breath-taking empathy, examining one of the most painful and emotion-laden topics in the modern world with dispassion, sensitivity and high erudition." Achcar, Khalidi says, "combines a historian's profound understanding of the workings of Arab political discourse with a fine appreciation of the traumatic valence of every aspect of this topic."

We customarily invite members of the University of Denver's faculty to serve as discussants at our center's events, to mix it up and generate critical dialogue. When we suggested this format to Professor Achcar, we were thrilled that he enthusiastically embraced the idea. We are blessed to have several colleagues with expertise in Jewish studies and the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. So we asked not one but two scholars to participate in a panel discussion on *The Arabs and the Holocaust* with its author. Those scholars were Ira Chernus, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the

author of numerous books, and Adam Rovner, Associate Professor of English and Jewish Literature at the University of Denver and the author of the new book *In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel*. (Full bios of all three scholars are at the end of this paper.)

The panel discussion, which we held the evening of May 13, 2014, was among the most intellectually fruitful events our center has organized. It was an enormously stimulating and spirited exchange, first among the panelists and then with the audience.

This Occasional Paper presents an edited transcript of that evening's discussion. But the paper opens with an edited transcript of a brief interview I conducted with Professor Achcar at our Center for Middle East Studies. That interview provides an overview of *The Arabs and the Holocaust* and thus serves to frame the panel discussion that follows.

In keeping with the mandate of our center, we are disseminating this text in the hope that it will contribute to greater understanding of one of the most recurring, perplexing and emotionally charged issues emanating from the Middle East today. This is by no means the final word on this topic, but it is an enormously important intervention on this poorly understood subject. In bringing together these three distinguished scholars and juxtaposing their perspectives in this critical exchange, this text makes a unique contribution to the literature.

We hope that you will benefit from reading it.

**Nader Hashemi**

Director of the Center for Middle East Studies  
Associate Professor of Middle East and Islamic Politics  
Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver



## The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives

### A Conversation between Nader Hashemi and Gilbert Achcar



Hashemi:

I've been reading your very important book *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, and I'd like you to explain, in broad terms, the prevalence and the persistence of Holocaust denial in the Arab-Islamic world today.

While most people are aware of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rhetoric on the topic, there is a less well-known episode that really highlights the question I'd like you to address. You discuss it in the book. I'm referring to Roger Garaudy, the famous French ex-Communist and convert to Islam, who published a book in 1996 called *Les Mythes fondateurs de la politique israélienne*, later translated into English as *The Founding Myths of Modern Israel*. This book contained arguments that contributed to Holocaust denial. When Garaudy travelled to the Arab world he was celebrated as a hero by people across the political spectrum — left/right, secular/religious — in part due to this book. This story would seem to confirm the worst stereotypes that many North Americans and Europeans have about the Arab and Islamic world. How do you explain the persistence of Holocaust denial in the Arab-Islamic world today?

Achcar:

Actually, not only has it persisted, but has actually been expanding over the last few decades. And there is already a clue to the answer to your question in the fact that this is happening at a time of heightening tensions between the Arab world, the Palestinians in particular, and the Israeli state. We have witnessed an increase in Israeli violence, starting with the 1982 invasion of Lebanon followed by 18 years of occupation, with violence peaking again with Israel's second major onslaught on Lebanon in 2006. This last episode was extremely intensive in brutality and destruction, as were the two rounds of Israeli bombing of Gaza in June 2006 and December 2008-January 2009.

All this took place against a background of bitter disillusionment with regard to the hopes created by the Oslo agreement and the so-called peace process after 1993. The euphoria of peace was very short-lived indeed: the Palestinians faced an increase in the expansion of Israeli settlements in the territories occupied since 1967, which destroyed all expectations, or rather illusions, about the peace process. This general background provides a key to understanding why Holocaust denial has been expanding in Arab countries and beyond them, in Muslim-majority countries.

#### **The Anti-Zionism of Fools**

It is in many ways a symptom of the increasing resentment against the state of Israel. Much of it, of course, is based on a very simplistic gut reaction, what I call the anti-Zionism of fools. The idea is that, since the state of Israel is seen as heavily exploiting the Holocaust, justifying everything it does by reference to the Jewish genocide and using it

I call it the anti-Zionism of fools. The idea is that since Israel is exploiting the Holocaust, justifying everything it does by reference to the Jewish genocide and using it to reject any criticism, it must therefore be exaggerating the Holocaust to exert moral blackmail.

to reject any criticism—telling the United States and Europe that they have no right to criticize Israel because they took part in the Holocaust or failed to prevent it—Israel must therefore be exaggerating the Holocaust and building up a myth in order to exert moral blackmail on the West. This is how the simplistic reasoning goes.

Thus, as more anger and resentment against the Israeli state build, the more people who are inspired by these feelings will tend to deny the Holocaust, believing that it is a way of being anti-Zionist. But it is actually an anti-Zionism of fools in the sense that it is fully counterproductive and does not harm Israel in the least. Instead, Arab Holocaust deniers render a major service to Zionist propaganda by confirming its claims that the Arabs are Nazi-sympathizing anti-Semites.

In the book, I quote Palestinian opinion surveys conducted by the University of Haifa. These surveys show very clearly the close correlation that exists between the increase in Holocaust denial and the tensions between the Palestinian community and the Israeli state.

This is basically the kind of mechanism at work, combined with much ignorance about the Holocaust in Arab countries — not among the Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship, but among the rest of the Palestinians and Arabs who have very little education about the Holocaust. It is a taboo issue in the Arab world, born of the same foolish logic according to which anyone who acknowledges this huge historical tragedy is lending credit to the Zionist cause.

And again, this is very shortsighted. Anyone keen on preventing Israel from instrumentalizing the Holocaust should start by fully acknowledging the Jewish genocide perpetrated by the Nazis as one of the most horrible crimes against humanity in history, and then — and only then — reject Israel's right to use this tragedy as a justification for actions that clash with any humanistic understanding of the lessons of the Holocaust.

These are lessons that indeed repudiate any form of discrimination — racial, ethnic, religious, gender-based — and all forms of military brutality, of *Machtpolitik*, of the law of the jungle, of rule by force, of the politics of conquest. This is what the lessons of the Holocaust are about.

Hashemi:

You make the very interesting point, which you just hinted at in your answer, that one reason Holocaust denial exists in the Arab-Islamic world is due to the decline of politics. In other words, the decline of open societies, the absence of political freedom, of open debate and the inability to have an honest conversation about history without being subjected to government censorship and manipulation. You suggest that had these conditions not existed during the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st, perhaps the problem you're talking about today would not have existed in the same form it did — and does.

Achcar:

Indeed. But this is, in some way, almost a structural condition, one that goes back several decades, whereas there is another element at play here, more directly relevant. It is the shift in the region's political environment from the 1950s and 1960s, into the 1970s, when the dominant discourse in popular politics was leftward oriented, to subsequent decades, when Islamic fundamentalism took over. The region's politics thus shifted from left-leaning nationalism, principally represented by Nasserism, to the gamut of Islamic fundamentalist currents.

And of course this ideological setting — the religious fundamentalist prism — facilitates the kind of perception that leads to Holocaust denial. It facilitates the “essentialization” of the conflict. That

Religious fundamentalism facilitates the ‘essentialization’ of the conflict. Fundamentalists tend to look at the conflict as one pitting Muslims against Jews, downplaying the distinction between Zionism and the Jews that left-wing nationalism emphasized.

is to say, if you hold an Islamic fundamentalist *Weltanschauung*, you will tend to look at the conflict with Israel as one pitting Muslims against Jews, and you will tend to downplay the distinction between Zionism and the Jews that left-wing nationalism emphasized, when it used to assert: “We are not against the Jews, we are against Zionism, and against racism in general.”

After the book came out, I did research on the coverage of the Eichmann trial in the Egyptian

newspaper *Al-Ahram*, which was the mouthpiece of Nasser’s regime. I examined two years of *Al-Ahram*, 1960-62. The result of my study was published in the Spring 2012 issue of the *Arab Studies Journal* under a title echoing Hannah Arendt’s famous *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. My article is titled “Eichmann in Cairo.” The article illuminates the differences between the types of discourses dominant today versus 50 years ago.

During the two years of coverage of the Eichmann trial in *Al-Ahram*, there was hardly any attempt to deny the Holocaust, or even the figure of six million Jews having perished as a result of the Nazi genocide, and no attempt whatsoever to deny Eichmann’s responsibility or express any kind of sympathy toward him.

There was, of course, much criticism of Israel’s exploitation of the Eichmann affair in order to justify its own anti-Arab policies, but a clear distinction was consistently drawn between Jews and Zionism. So it was a discourse which, compared to the kind of discourse that prevails today in large sections of the Arab media and public opinion, appears very enlightened indeed.

Hashemi:

Correct me if I’m wrong but are you arguing that if the Israel-Palestine conflict could be solved tomorrow in a just way for both sides, then Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism would start to decline in the Arab-Islamic world?

Ahcar:

I have little doubt about that. We did not have opinion surveys on this issue at the time, but I am pretty sure that when the illusions about Oslo were at their peak, Holocaust denial had fallen sharply among Palestinians. The reason for this is relatively easy to understand.

German or Austrian Holocaust denial, for example, can be based on rabid anti-Semitism or on rabid nationalism in the denial of a genocide perpetrated by the deniers’ own country. The difference is that the Arabs were not the perpetrators of the Holocaust, so it in fact costs Arabs nothing to do what Mahmoud Abbas recently did, acknowledging that the Holocaust was “the most heinous crime against humanity” in modern times, the most appalling tragedy of the 20th century.

It should be no problem for any Palestinian or Arab to acknowledge this historical truth since it provides no justification whatsoever for what was done to the Palestinians, precisely because they



neither bear nor share any responsibility whatsoever for perpetrating the Holocaust. The fact is, however, that one central effort of Zionist propaganda in the “Arab-Israeli war of narratives” — as I called it in the subtitle of the book — has been to “Nazify” the Arabs and Palestinians, and portray them as bearing some responsibility for the Holocaust.

Hashemi:

In this context, one of the interesting things you discuss in the book is that in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, the entry on the Mufti of Jerusalem is longer than the entry for Adolf Eichmann. That is both shocking and revealing.

Achcar:

Yes indeed. The biographical entry for Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, is longer than those of all the key figures of Nazism, with the exception of Hitler himself. The first one to comment on this was the late Peter Novick, the University of Chicago historian and author of *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999), a seminal work.

Hashemi:

He blurbed your book.

Achcar:

Indeed. The Israeli historian Tom Segev has noted that visitors to Yad Vashem, the memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, get the impression that Amin al-Husseini played a major role in the Holocaust. But this is sheer propaganda, devoid of any historical accuracy.

Hashemi:

This is highly revealing. It demonstrates how the persistence of the Israel-Palestine conflict has led to a distortion in history not only on the Arab and Islamic side, but also on the Israeli and Zionist side as well.

Achcar:

Of course. Add to this an even more important consideration. On the one hand, there is the fact that, in the same way that Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic attitudes abound in the Arab world, so does anti-Arab racism in Israel. Civil rights organizations in Israel and prominent critical figures of the Israeli intelligentsia have denounced this pervasive racism, which is integral to the institutional structure of the Israeli state and the way it functions.

Hashemi:

And it's getting worse.

Achcar:

Indeed. There is open institutional anti-Arab discrimination in Israel working through the cynical requisite of having to serve in the army in order to access several categories of jobs and positions, knowing that Arabs are “exempted” from military service.

Israeli *Nakba* denial is actually far more serious Arab Holocaust denial. Arabs bear no responsibility for the Holocaust. With *Nakba* denial, we are talking about a state that denies what it itself perpetrated.

### ***Nakba* Denial**

On the other hand, while it is true that Holocaust denial is widespread in Arab countries, does the Israeli state not officially deny the *Nakba* (the “Catastrophe” of 1948 from the Palestinian point of view)? Even the Israeli historian Benny

Morris, after his metamorphosis from left-wing New Historian to right-wing revisionist Zionist — or “neo-Zionist,” as they are called — did not hesitate to publicly describe what the Zionists did to the Palestinians in 1948 as “ethnic cleansing.” And yet this crime is officially denied by the Israeli state.

This denial is actually far more serious than that of Arabs — whether Palestinians, Egyptians, Syrians or others — who deny the Holocaust, a genocide for which they bear no responsibility. Here we are talking about a state that denies what it itself perpetrated. Of course the *Nakba* was not a genocide, but it was nevertheless an act of ethnic cleansing, which is a crime against humanity by international legal standards, albeit of a lesser magnitude than genocide.

So here is a state still denying a crime it perpetrated, in the same way that the Turkish state, for instance, still denies the Armenian genocide. Such attitudes are much more serious than denial of the Holocaust by Arabs, whether out of ignorance combined with foolishness, or out of political foolishness alone.

Hashemi:

Your book is a major contribution to both Arab intellectual history and to the literature on Holocaust studies. It’s a fascinating read. I thank you for writing it.

Ahcar:

Very kind of you.

A Panel Discussion on Gilbert Achcar's *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*

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Ira Chernus  
Adam Rovner  
Gilbert Achcar



## The Holocaust Narrative as a Conversation Stopper

*Ira Chernus*

Thank you for inviting me to respond to the work of a scholar as eminent as Gilbert Achcar. It's a great honor.

This is an unusual event because we are in the United States talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and focusing on the issue of narrative. Typically Americans deal with this issue by focusing on facts. They assume that if they collect enough facts they will be able to figure out who is right and who is wrong.

But I've been in debates with supporters of Israeli policy for decades now, and I realized long ago that it's naïve to think anyone will change their minds just by hearing facts. The debate goes on so fiercely because we all begin with different assumptions, assumptions that combine to form narratives. We cling to our narratives, and they tell us which facts we should ignore, which ones we should focus on, and how we should interpret those facts. Then we throw our facts at each other in an endless volley that simply cements each side more firmly in its own view. As Professor Achcar reminds us, the heart of the conflict is not about different facts but different narratives.

Israelis and Palestinians have known this for a long time. They take it for granted that the conflict is driven by competing narratives. But here in the US we have such faith in the power of facts that we generally overlook the essential role of narratives. So it's really refreshing to have a dialogue like this devoted to the essential role of stories. And, as Professor Achcar also reminds us, we cannot understand the stories that shape political life in the present unless we examine their history.

I want to broaden the conversation by looking briefly at the history of the story of the Holocaust as it has been told in the United States.

While the Holocaust was happening, American news media reported on it, but few Americans paid much attention. Very few thought that they were fighting against Germany to stop the extermination of Jews.

After the war, the Holocaust was largely forgotten. By the 1950s, even American Jews paid little attention to it. When surveys asked them about the essential factors of their Jewish identity, they rarely mentioned the Holocaust.

That changed dramatically during the Six-Day War of 1967. Jews in the US offered an unexpected outpouring of support for Israel, and the large majority accepted the narrative that had long been commonplace among most Israeli Jews. Their story said Israel had arisen from the ashes of the Holocaust to make sure it never happened again, the Arabs were bent on exterminating the Jews, and only Israel's military might could prevent another Holocaust. "*Ein breira* — We have no choice," the Israeli government said. "We must fight, win and occupy Palestinian lands to stave off another Holocaust."

Historians are still debating how much danger Israel really faced in 1967. But few American Jews doubted Israel's story. For the first time, the memory of the Holocaust became central in American Jewish life, since it seemed to justify Israel's massive military violence and the occupation. Throughout the 1970s, that story grew into a dogma among most American Jews.

However Jews did not have as much influence over US policy as most people think. As the US poured military aid into Israel during the '67 war and again in the war of 1973, the American media made the Israeli Holocaust narrative commonplace among American gentiles too. Israel had proven itself militarily invulnerable. Yet the common view here was that Israel was always the underdog, constantly threatened with extinction.

By 1973 that was becoming an especially common story among gentile conservatives. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were easing Cold War tensions, and conservatives launched a campaign to return to a more hawkish, pre-Vietnam policy stance.

One of their weapons was an attack on the Nixon-Kissinger effort to mediate the Israeli-Arab conflict. They charged that the president and his chief advisor were growing soft, that they were not giving all-out support to an imperiled Israel and so were increasing the chances of another Holocaust. It was a powerful, emotionally-charged narrative that helped make extreme conservatives dominant in the Republican party.

Those conservatives also got a boost from the growing ranks of the evangelical Christian Right. Most evangelicals embraced the story that the Holocaust was the reason for Israel's being and that only a huge boost in US military aid could prevent another Holocaust.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 sealed the conservative victory. By then the narrative linking the Holocaust to all-out support of Israel was virtually dogma across most of the political spectrum. So most Americans took the first intifada, in the late 1980s, as proof that the Palestinians wanted to wipe out the Jews. Only a minority of us recognized the intifada as a war of national liberation.

Gradually, more and more Jews in the US began to question the received narrative. They began to ask whether Israel's Holocaust narrative had been used for political purposes, to legitimate the injustice and perpetuate the conflict.

Though the Oslo Agreement brought hope for Israeli-Palestinian peace, most Americans continued to see Israel as an imperiled victim of potential Arab violence. That view seemed to be confirmed by the second intifada, in the early 2000s.

But then, a few years ago, something very surprising began to happen. Gradually, more and more Jews in the US began to question the received narrative. They began to ask whether an unjust Israeli policy bore the greatest share of responsibility for keeping the conflict going. And they began to ask whether Israel's Holocaust narrative had been used for political purposes, to legitimate the injustice and perpetuate the conflict. That is now a matter of debate — sometimes very intense debate — within the American Jewish community.

The growing Jewish skepticism about this Israeli story has given gentile Americans permission to begin to question it too. Some liberals have begun to criticize Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, and public opinion polls show that sympathy for Israeli policy dropping.

Most conservatives, though, and especially evangelical Christians, still give unwavering support to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and militant repression of Palestinians. And overall public support for the Palestinian cause remains quite low, far lower than support for Israel.

One main reason for this disparity in US public opinion is the persistent grip of Israel's Holocaust narrative. Even many liberals, who have given up knee-jerk support of Israeli policy, still have a sort of knee-jerk acceptance of the familiar Holocaust narrative: Even if Israel has gone too far in protecting itself, they say, it still has some basic security needs, and all Jews have some basic emotional needs, that must be addressed, because all are haunted by the memory of the Holocaust and the very real fear that it could happen again.

This narrative makes American liberals hesitate to voice strong support for the Palestinian cause or consider Palestinian security needs. They fear that they'll be viewed as forgetting the Holocaust, or not caring enough about its horrors. In that way, the Holocaust narrative becomes a conversation-stopper and thus a trump card in the hands of conservatives, nearly all of them gentiles, who lead the campaign to keep US policy heavily tilted toward Israel.

This brings us to the very practical effect of the American Holocaust narrative. In the recent round of US-led negotiations, which have ended at least for now, the Obama administration presented itself as an even-handed mediator. In fact there is abundant evidence that the talks failed because the administration continued the traditional US tilt toward Israel; it refused to pressure the Israeli government to follow through on its promised concessions.

The dominant public story, though, is that the talks failed because the Palestinian Authority agreed to a unity deal with Hamas. The Obama administration backed the Israeli government in denouncing this as a totally unacceptable move, something dastardly enough to justify ending the talks. And this made perfect sense to most Americans because Hamas is now cast in the public narrative as the body most likely to instigate another Holocaust. The long-standing Hamas offer of de facto acceptance of Israel is ignored, because it doesn't fit the dominant narrative.

So the Holocaust narrative continues to exert its potent effect on public opinion here, especially among gentile conservatives. Ironically and tragically, as Professor Achcar's work reveals, there is more debate about the meaning of the Holocaust among Palestinians than there is among Americans. And that just may be the biggest factor preventing the US from being a truly even-handed broker leading the way to a just peace.

## Arab and Jewish Nationalisms in Gilbert Achcar's Narrative

Adam Rovner



I am not an historian or a political scientist, so I was somewhat reluctant to take up Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel's invitation to participate in this panel on Professor Achcar's *The Arabs and The Holocaust*. After all, I am a professor of literature. Among my areas of expertise are modern Hebrew literature and Holocaust literature, so I do at least know something about narratives. In particular, I have intimate knowledge, owing to my having lived in Israel for several years, of the Israeli narrative of the Holocaust — which forms part of the subtitle of Professor Achcar's work.

*The Arabs and the Holocaust* is often a brave book. I read it cover to cover and found in it a wealth of information based on what is clearly voluminous research. Professor Achcar's sympathies, it should be clear, are with the liberal westernizers and the Arab Marxists about whom he writes. We should remember that it was these constituencies in the Arab world who were most consistently opposed to Nazism. Achcar views nationalism, broadly defined, as a danger to liberal humanist values. He is a

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forceful critic of fundamentalist Arab nationalist strains for their opportunistic adoption, in some cases, of Nazi rhetoric. And he is vociferous in his condemnation of the reactionary pan-Islamists who give vent to unrepentant anti-Semitism and exterminationist rhetoric. All this history Professor Achcar sets out in his book's first part — "The Time of the *Shoah*."

He provides this valuable knowledge base in order to contextualize the second part of his book, which concerns Arab reactions to the Jews and the Holocaust, as well as Israeli reactions to the *Nakba*. Although those of a conservative bent would probably take issue with a book structured in this way — part one, "The Time of the *Shoah*" and part two, "The Time of the *Nakba*" — I find this organization to make sense according to the internal logic of the narrative Achcar structures. The discordant reference to both the *Shoah* and the *Nakba* may well be provocative to those who fear that in such a contiguity a sense of "equation" between the Nazi war against the Jews and the on-going dispossession and occupation of Palestinians will be established. Let me be clear here and say that Achcar does not make such an equation. In fact he explicitly rejects such rhetoric, the implicit contrapuntal effect of his argument notwithstanding. This rejection of facile comparisons is to Achcar's credit and speaks to the candor of his work. Nonetheless, the internal logic of the book is at times troubling.

As I understand it, Achcar's logic is that the Holocaust, a catastrophe for the Jewish world and indeed for humanity itself, precipitated a calamity for the Palestinians. Again, this point may ruffle some feathers, but Achcar would find many Israelis and non-Israeli Zionists in accord with this notion. Now, it remains an open historiographical question as to whether Israel would have come into existence without the Holocaust. Professor Achcar does not believe it would have; I believe it would have. There's no way to answer this counterfactual question of Israel's (non)establishment. That is best left for parlor games — or novels — rather than history. One thing is for certain: Israel would not look as it does today, nor would the Jewish state have developed in the manner it has, without the Holocaust. Achcar is on very firm

ground in his analysis that the public discourse, political commemorations, and institutional memories of the Holocaust in Israel are often predicated on just such a linkage between catastrophe — *Shoah* — and national rebirth. The two concepts, *Shoah* and rebirth — *tkumah* — are indeed often connected. One word follows the other in an almost automatic call-and-response in Hebrew-speaking Israeli society: “*shoah v’tkumah*.”

The internal logic of Achcar’s book naturally reveals the author’s ideological position. He is opposed to “anti-Semitism,” but he also opposes “Zionism.” Unfortunately, he does not define Zionism, which never really was and is not now a monolithic ideology — and this is a shortcoming. Achcar may not be well-versed in the differing strains of Zionism as they emerged historically from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. Students of Zionism, however, will find this aspect of his work a weak point. Achcar discerns a tendency in Israeli sources to treat “the Arabs” as a monolithic entity without regard to the fractious ideologies held by Arab intellectuals and statesmen. This is certainly true, but the fact that he himself does not adequately treat the nuances of Zionist ideology is problematic. This substantial oversight obscures the central issue at stake in Achcar’s work: he is an avowed anti-Zionist. His objection to Zionism, however nebulously defined, stems from his leftist commitments to fight against imperialism, colonialism, racism, and ethnocentrism, and his determination to see “justice” done. “Justice” contains a powerful charge, but the problem is that the more vaguely defined the term is, the less powerful its charge.

Now, to return to what I might call Achcar’s “principled” anti-Zionism. He sees Zionism and the State of Israel as an imperialist or colonialist entity that is essentially racist or ethnocentric. It would be mere apologetics to deny that successive Israeli governments have perpetrated forms of settler colonialism and that the State of Israel is de facto, if not de jure, “ethnocentric” — if by this term we (problematically) understand Jews to be an ethnicity. The charge of imperialism may hold to some extent as well. Even before the British issued the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which promised a Jewish national home in Palestine, the Zionist Organization incorporated its bank in England in order to fund settlement in Ottoman Palestine on the model of Cecil Rhodes’ Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Achcar seems to be unaware of this fact, but the historical record of this financial cornerstone of Zionism is beyond dispute; its significance, of course, is what disputes are made of.

As to the charge of colonialism, it is true that certain elements of “settler colonialism” are present in the case of contemporary Israel, though others are absent. Even as a non-specialist, I believe it is absolutely clear that Israeli settlement over the 1967 border, the Green Line, reveals characteristics of “formal settler colonialism.” Now to the question of whether Zionism is inherently racist. Since it would be an error to identify Jews as a “race,” I don’t see how this can be the case. Of course, I understand that the term can be used broadly, but I think it’s best to be as precise as possible in these matters. The charge of “racism” is often used rhetorically by those who object to Israeli policies (or Israel’s very existence) and is best left to polemics. Achcar’s book is not a polemic but a controversial work of scholarship. The much thornier problem is whether Zionism is “ethnocentric.” Yes, I suppose it is, but probably no more so than any other national movement that gained momentum in the 20th century. On balance, Achcar’s claims that Zionism adheres to a colonialist model, prospered under imperialism, and remains as ethno-territorialist as every other ethnic territorialism appears to me to be correct.

What we find in Achcar’s anti-Zionism is a kind of internationalist Marxism that imagines a prelapsarian world where every group knew its place and stayed there. But mass dislocation, conquest, and usurpation define both the modern and pre-modern worlds.

This all sounds like powerful condemnation, and coming from Achcar it is. Right-thinking people — and by right-thinking, I mean left-thinking people — are opposed to colonialism. And all right-thinking people find it objectionable to profit from imperial adventurism. And all right-thinking people oppose ethno-territorialism. The problem is, we're not really opposed to profiting from imperialism and colonialism. If we were, we'd all pack up and move back to where we came from, unless we're Native American. The US hasn't returned territory to native tribes, or to Mexico or Spain for that matter. Australia hasn't returned land to its aboriginal peoples either. Nor has China or Russia, though perhaps we shouldn't expect much of those countries. Nor have any Central American or South American governments set sail for Europe and left their indigenous peoples in charge. My point is that colonial entities and the profiting from past colonialisms exist today, contrary to Achcar's assertion that "the Palestinian question [is] the last major burning issue of European colonialism" (26). The US, Australia, and Brazil may not fall under the "burning issues" category, but only because they to a large extent extinguished the opposition. China and Russia aren't open societies so they can easily put out whatever rebellious fires flare up.

What we really find in Achcar's anti-Zionism is a kind of internationalist Marxism that imagines a prelapsarian world where every group knew its place and stayed there. Or failing that, that we recognize

Achcar's fundamental delegitimization of Jewish claims to national sympathies comes across as a very strange way to mend what he presents as a tragic war of narratives between Israelis and Arabs.

the errors of our ways and link arms and march towards a brighter, social revolutionary future. Unfortunately, the former position does not accord with reality and the latter is unlikely to ever come to pass. Mass dislocation, emigration, conquest, settlement, usurpation, profiteering, exploitation, and population shifts not only define the modern world, they defined the pre-

modern world as well. But these are big questions that take me a bit far afield from Achcar's text itself. And my real concern with the book is that Professor Achcar seems to allow for various expressions of liberal Arab nationalism, the more Marxist the better, but not for liberal Jewish nationalism.

What do I mean? My close reading of the book makes it seem as if no territorial sovereignty should be allowed Jews in Israel/Palestine, if not practically than at least in principle. I point here to the last dozen or so pages of the book wherein Achcar describes a speech made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2008 — a speech that the author characterizes in the following way: "...she congratulated a bellicose state that has continued to occupy the territory of its neighbors for sixty years..." (281). I understand that Professor Achcar means that Israel has for 60 years — that is, since 1948, since the state's internationally recognized legal establishment — occupied Palestinian land. On its own, the statement is defensible, at least from Achcar's partisan position. Still, this is a strange position for him to take. So far as I'm aware, with the exception of the fundamentalist pan-Islamists that Achcar rejects, no Palestinian negotiating position has been based on this notion of Israel's fundamental illegitimacy for decades. Likewise, while various Arab states and peoples — the Egyptians, the Palestinians, the Lebanese, for example — are allowed their expressions of nationalism in Achcar's book, Jews are not allowed their nationalism. The subtext of all his assertions — and I could be misreading him — is that Jews are in essence a religious group, not a national entity. This would come as news to many millions of Jews. Achcar's fundamental delegitimization of Jewish claims to national sympathies comes across as a very strange way to mend what he presents as a tragic war of narratives between Israelis and Arabs.

Despite these criticisms, I retain a profound respect for much of Achcar's book. In fact I am in agreement with him about a great deal even though I am a Zionist, albeit a rather idiosyncratic one. Israeli policy has



certainly tilted to the right and continues to do so. The fact that leading Israeli politicians maintain a belief that the country's military can force a settlement is certainly wrong-headed. Israeli historiography does indeed tend to exaggerate Arab support for the Nazis. That the anti-Semitic mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini features as a major villain in Israeli (and other) narratives of the Holocaust is not in doubt. But it's not surprising that al-Husseini has come to symbolize Arab fundamentalism to Israelis and others. Al-Husseini was indeed a fundamentalist who spent much of World War II as a guest of Hitler. According to Achcar himself, al-Husseini "came to represent the Arab majority view in Palestine" after 1936 (43). Achcar notes that only "60% of Palestinians supported the Nazis in 1941" (46). That is, he finds it significant that even during the Reich's greatest period of triumph, a significant minority of Palestinians opposed the Nazis. Al-Husseini represented the majority view, as Achcar himself indicates, and even after the war when his ties to Nazi leaders and the crimes of the Third Reich came to light, the mufti assumed the presidency of the Arab Higher Committee, which represented Arab national demands on Palestine. One can therefore understand how the mufti has loomed large in the Israeli national consciousness.

Educated Israelis are not ignorant of Palestinian suffering. Most do know what the *Nakba* refers to, though many treat the narrative of Palestinian dispossession and their continued occupation with a shrug, or justify the state of affairs by pointing to perceived Arab intransigence. This has not always been the case. Canonical Jewish Israeli authors such as Benjamin Tammuz and S. Yizhar [Yizhar Smilansky] described Palestinian expulsion and domination with great sensitivity in widely-read literary works as early as the 1940s. None of this is really news to Israelis then, or the least bit controversial to the country's intelligentsia. To underscore my claim, let me end here with a quote from Emil Habibi, a Palestinian-Israeli communist, and a humane and well-regarded author. He addressed the following in 1986 to Israeli Hebrew readers in the journal *Politka*: "Had it not been for your *Shoah* [...] then the calamity that remains the lot of my people [the Palestinians] would not have been possible" (Emil Habibi, "Your Holocaust — Our Disaster," *Politika* 8: 26-27 (1986): 26-27. [Hebrew]).

Achcar's important book exists as a valuable and detailed commentary on Habibi's nearly thirty-year old passage. But we should note that this position — Habibi's and Achcar's — has been stated and restated, contested and upheld for decades in Israel, by both Jews and Palestinians, by both Zionists and anti-Zionists.

# The Mote and the Beam: A Response to Ira Chernus and Adam Rovner

Gilbert Achcar



Thank you very much indeed, Professor Chernus and Professor Rovner, for your highly stimulating comments. It is truly an honor and a pleasure for me to have this discussion with both of you.

Let me start with one issue related to Professor Chernus's comment on the United States: the issue of US responsibility in the Holocaust, which I deem to be very important, though often overlooked. Here is actually a major illustration of the parable of "the mote and the beam." The fact that this country closed its doors to Jewish immigration in the most crucial period certainly played a major role in increasing the numbers of the victims of the Holocaust.

In his excellent book *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, the historian Tom Segev — commenting on a proposal that Israeli citizenship be posthumously conferred upon all Holocaust victims — observes that many of them died precisely because they did not want to move to Palestine; in other words, they did not adhere to the Zionist project. And there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of European Jews would have much preferred to come to the United States than go to Palestine — not an attractive destination in their eyes.

That is also why it took the agreement between the Zionist movement and the Nazi authorities in 1933, the Haavara Agreement, to, in some way, force German Jews to go to Palestine as the only destination where they could transfer part of their capital or belongings. This was when the Nazis' response to the Jewish presence in Germany — before engaging in the "final solution," that is the genocide, starting from 1941 — was still to turn the country *Judenrein*, "rid of Jews," by way of deportation, expulsion, or "ethnic cleansing" as we would call it today.

The Holocaust has had more impact on Arab history than on any other non-Western histories.

It is indeed important to point to US responsibility in that regard, as well as to the responsibility of Britain, another country which did far from everything it could to provide a safe haven to European Jews. And they were not alone. At the Evian Conference organized by Franklin Roosevelt in 1938, in an attempt to find outlets for European Jews, each of the 32 countries represented (with the single exception of the Dominican Republic) found some pretext or excuse to explain that they could not accept any more Jewish refugees.

And yet you often hear the argument that the Palestinians bear responsibility in the Holocaust because they did not let Jewish immigration into Palestine continue at the same pace after 1939, when of course there were already many more European Jewish migrants in Palestine in proportion to the autochthonous population than in any other country on earth.

Having made this additional comment, I thoroughly agree with Professor Chernus's assessment of the image of Israel and its uses in US domestic politics.

Let me turn now to the points made by Professor Rovner. As he emphasized — and I thank him for that — I do not draw any equivalence between the *Shoah* and the *Nakba*. In this respect, I was glad when Mahmoud Abbas recently described the Holocaust as "the most heinous crime to have occurred against humanity in the modern era."

The division of my book into two parts — part one, “The Time of the *Shoah*” and part two, “The Time of the *Nakba*” — is done, of course, with regard to Arab history, since it is a book about the *Arabs* and the Holocaust. This is not to say that, from the Arab point of view, the *Shoah* and the *Nakba* are equivalent in scope, but that the *Shoah* bears direct relevance to Arab history inasmuch as it played a key role in the production of the *Nakba* and the creation of the state of Israel. Otherwise, the *Shoah* would bear no more relevance for the Arabs than it bears for the South Asians or the East Asians.

This connection to the Holocaust, the fact that the Holocaust has had more impact on Arab history than on any other non-Western histories, is what lies behind the statement by Emil Habibi that Professor Rovner quoted. It reminds me of another statement by Mahmoud Darwish that I cite in my book: he said in an interview with the Israeli poet Helit Yeshurun that “the international interest in the Palestinian question merely reflects the interest people take in the Jewish question.”

This is certainly true for Western public opinion. If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict holds such importance in Western public debate — proportionally more than most other regional conflicts if we consider the numbers of the victims — it is because there is a more direct collective connection in Europe and the United States to the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict than with any other non-Western regional conflict.

I used the Hebrew designation *Shoah* instead of Holocaust — *Shoah*, as you know, means “catastrophe” (as does *Nakba*, incidentally) — because I dealt in the book, not with the genocide alone, but with the protracted catastrophic time that started with the Nazis coming to power and ended with their defeat in the Second World War. For this, the term *Shoah* is more relevant than Holocaust, which is actually a very disputable term in itself, one which many Jewish scholars reject because of its terrible etymology when applied to the fate of the Jews under the Nazis — what Raul Hilberg, the world’s preeminent scholar of the Holocaust, called “the destruction of the European Jews” in his authoritative three-volume study.

Now, if we take this long historical perspective, and just look at the figures, we find that Jewish immigration to Palestine had dwindled to very low figures prior to the Nazi seizure of power (between 2,000 and 5,000 per year from 1927 to 1931), with even negative immigration for some years when more Jews left the country than entered it. The ascendance to power of the Nazis in 1933 naturally gave a major boost to the Zionist movement, which took it as a confirmation of its view that Jews were simply unwelcome in Europe. In the clash of ideologies among European Jews, the advent of the Nazi state provided Zionism with the decisive boost it needed to implement its project.

As you know, for a long time, Zionism remained a minority outlook among European Jews, where it was combatted by liberal assimilationists, Marxist internationalists, and various other currents like the Bund, which embodied socialist Jewish/Yiddish nationalism. To be clear, I never suggested that Jews are not allowed their nationalism — Professor Rovner misunderstood me on this. It is only that my attitude toward “nationalism” — any nationalism — depends on its nature, on whether it is emancipatory like that of the Bund in Eastern Europe or colonial like that of Zionism in Palestine.

So Zionism remained a minority trend among European Jews until it was given a major boost by Nazism, including a direct contribution by the Nazis to the emigration of German Jews to Palestine — both legal and illegal, the latter circumventing the reduced quotas imposed by British mandatory authorities, especially after the 1939 White Paper. This cooperation continued until 1941. This is abundantly documented in the definitive study of the subject, University of Vermont historian and Holocaust scholar Francis Nicosia’s book on *Zionism and Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany*.

In addition to all that, consider the 1947 UN resolution on the partition of Palestine: Jews constituted a third of the population of Palestine, the vast majority of them having immigrated during the previous 15 years. Then you have a resolution giving the future “Jewish state” 55 percent of Palestine’s territory. Even if you believe that recent immigrants have the same right to a territory as the people who have lived there for generations, where was the equity in that resolution?

The fact, of course, is that the “Jewish state” was seen as a place to which Jewish Holocaust survivors, hitherto living as “displaced persons” in camps in Europe, were to be sent. Europe wanted to get rid of them, and the United States did not want to take them in. In the final analysis, as Theodor Herzl himself put it in his well-known manifesto whose title is wrongly translated in English as *The Jewish State* (whereas it should be *The State of the Jews*), the “propelling force” of Zionism is anti-Semitism, “the misery of the Jews,” as Herzl wrote. This is indeed the dialectic which led to the implementation of the Zionist statist project.

Another important remark Professor Rovner made about my book is that I myself have been guilty of the “beam and mote” type of ethnocentrism in rejecting the monolithic, homogeneous representation of the Arabs while engaging in exactly the same for Zionism. I contend that this is again a misreading of what I wrote, which is very much the contrary. Allow me to read you a brief excerpt of my book, where I comment on Avraham Burg, who served as president of the Jewish Agency and World Zionist Movement, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, and Speaker of the Israeli Knesset, before authoring an important, deeply introspective and widely discussed book, *The Holocaust Is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes*. I wrote (p. 290 of the US edition):

Burg saves the honor of one strain of Zionism, for the problem with the equation “Zionism = racism” is its totalizing nature. There is Zionism and “Zionism,” as Martin Buber once wrote; we can hardly treat all Zionists, from Avnery (Uri) to Ze’evi (to mention only contemporaries while leaving “post-Zionists” aside), as birds of the same racist feather.

I am saying here exactly the contrary of what Professor Rovner reproached me for. As a matter of fact, I was publicly criticized from an Arab nationalist perspective for precisely this statement. I therefore resolutely plead Not Guilty to the accusation that I am lumping together all brands of Zionism.

Let me turn now to the issue of the Israeli state’s colonialist nature. First of all, to acknowledge the fact that a state came into existence as the outcome of a colonial enterprise — and I am speaking here to an audience in North America, of all places — does not imply a denial of the right of the population that resulted from this historical process to live on that state’s territory, especially when most of them are born there.

Acknowledging the fact that the United States came into existence through the colonization of this country by European immigrants, even characterizing what they perpetrated on the native population as a genocide, does not imply that there was no new American nation born in that process that has no right to exist on this territory. Several states on earth were actually the result of historical processes which were anything but fair or just.

There is a tendency to believe that if one acknowledges the settler-colonial character of the state of Israel, then one also shares the views expressed in the Hamas Charter. That is simply not true.

There is a tendency to believe that if one acknowledges the settler-colonial character of the state of Israel, then one also shares the views expressed in the Hamas Charter. That is simply not true. Many post-Zionists, several of Israel’s New Historians,

acknowledge the settler-colonial character of the state of Israel. The fact is that Theodor Herzl explicitly referred to the model of white European settler colonialism in his blueprint for the Zionist state. This is important to acknowledge.

When I stress the necessity of mutual recognition of the Holocaust and the *Nakba*, it is first of all because of the crucial importance of a recognition by the Israelis of the historical injustice done to the Palestinians — not to mention, of course, the continuous oppression the Palestinians suffer at the hands of the Israeli state. The acknowledgment of that historical injustice is a prerequisite for a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

In the same way, although Palestinians and Arabs bear no direct responsibility for the Holocaust — unlike Israel's, or the Israeli state's, direct responsibility for the *Nakba* — I emphasize that the Arab side needs also to acknowledge the Holocaust and recognize its importance in the Israeli psyche in order to enable the mutual understanding without which there can be no real dialogue and no lasting peace.

Professor Rovner criticizes me for writing that “the Palestinian question [is] the last major burning issue of European colonialism,” and reminds us that the US, Australia and Brazil are also colonial entities, with the difference that they have extinguished the opposition. Here again, I plead Not Guilty to what I am accused of overlooking. When explaining why the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is given more importance than various other ongoing conflicts and tragedies, I wrote (p. 26) that there are several reasons for this:

One is that Israel is the only European colonial settler state in which the political rights of the native population have yet to be restored (apart from places such as North America and Australia, where colonization all but wiped out the native populations).

I then went on to explain what is specific about the Israeli-Palestinian case. All this is done not because I advocate “throwing the Jews into the sea” or anything of the sort, needless to say, but because I believe that there can be no real peace between Arabs and Israelis without some “truth and reconciliation” process. In order to achieve reconciliation, as they endeavored to do in South Africa, you need to acknowledge the truth. That is why I believe that Israel's New Historians, by acknowledging facts that were denied so vehemently in Israel for decades — and are still officially denied — have played a crucial role in facilitating this dialogue.

I do believe that there is no peaceful future for Israel in Zionism — even in its liberal variation — but only in what is called in Israel post-Zionism, coexisting with an Arab environment that would have superseded all brands of nationalism. Nationalism is too often, as we can see again and again, a very deadly disease. Superseding nationalism is a precondition for the achievement of real peaceful coexistence between nations.

Thank you very much for your attention.

## Panelist Biographies

### Gilbert Achcar

Gilbert Achcar is Professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. He has been called "one of the best analysts of the contemporary Arab world" in *Le Monde*. His many books include *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, *The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder*, and *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*. His books have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Romanian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Urdu. He has taught and worked at various universities and research centers in Beirut, Berlin and Paris.

### Ira Chernus

Ira Chernus is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he has taught the history of Judaism for 35 years. His many books include *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism: Studies in the History of Midrash*, *Dr. Strangegod: On the Symbolic Meaning of Nuclear Weapons*, *Nuclear Madness: Religion and the Psychology of the Nuclear Age*, *General Eisenhower: Ideology and Discourse*, *Apocalypse Management: Eisenhower and the Discourse of National Insecurity*, *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin*, and *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea*. His blog, Mythic America, is featured on the History News Network.

### Adam Rovner

Adam Rovner is Associate Professor of English and Jewish Literature at the University of Denver, where he teaches transnational Holocaust literature, modern Hebrew literature and narrative theory. He is the author of *In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel*, an intellectual history of alternative Jewish homelands, which the historian Tom Segev calls a "path breaking study [that] takes us on a riveting journey [through a] little known chapter in modern Jewish history" and Professor David Shneer calls "a masterpiece ... a must read for anyone interested in global Jewish history or in the history of Israel."



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