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“Muslims are the New Jews” in the West: Reflections on Contemporary Parallelisms

This article examines a spectrum of contemporary texts by Muslim essayists, scholars, and activists based in the Arab world, in Europe, and in the United States that comparatively analyzed Jewish experiences in the West as invaluable lessons for Muslim minorities. These included: antisemitism and the struggle against it; segregation from and integration into majority societies; and political lobbying on behalf of the “greater nation.” The article argues that the diversity of Jewish realities, past and present, and the general sense that Jewish minorities in the West ultimately found ways to preserve their religious identity while amassing social-political influence, have rendered comparisons between Muslims and Jews an essential aspect of different (and at times contesting) arguments about the future of Muslim minorities in the West.

Introduction

In 2012, Israel’s Channel 10, the country’s second-largest commercial television network, aired a documentary series entitled “Allah Islam,” which painted an alarming picture of radicalized Muslim communities in Europe. The series, described by several critics as uneven,¹ was met with exceptional public interest, with ratings for the network soaring to as much as 20 percent. The notion that Europe is being Islamized, or is under “Muslim occupation,” has been repeatedly articulated in recent years in Israeli media. Reports on European Jews (particularly French Jews), who migrated to Israel or contemplate doing so and invoke their concern about Muslim attitudes to Jews as a main motivation, contribute to the image of European Muslims as an imminent threat.² In the past decade,

Note: This is a republication of the author’s earlier publication of the same title in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2016): 1–15.

1 Cf. A. Mendelzon, “Ma Mevi Yoter Rating me-Sinat Muslimim?,” [“Nothing Provides Greater TV Ratings than Hatred for Muslims?”] *Mako*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.mako.co.il/video-blogs-specials/Article-f25e58c13eea931006.htm>.

2 For example, in the words of Sandra, a 35-year-old French Jew, who emigrated on July 16, 2014, with her husband and four children:

I have given several dozen public lectures on Muslim minorities in Europe to Israeli audiences. When the time for question and answer comes, participants—usually highly educated and politically moderate senior citizens—often express the conviction that Europe is being, or already has been, “taken over” by Islam, and that it is headed for a catastrophe that endangers its Jewish minorities and Israeli interests. A sense of Schadenfreude, that Europeans will finally get a taste of the medicine which Israelis have swallowed for many years, is the frequent undertone of these analyses.

“Muslims of Europe”: A Fictitious Concept?

As is the case with many of the discussions on Islam in the West, common depictions of a clear-cut rivalry and “inherent clash” between the Jews and Muslims of Europe are predominately characterized by essentializations. They gravely err in two respects. First, in political, social, and cultural terms, “Muslims of Europe” is almost a fictitious concept. The Muslims of the continent are diverse and divided in their religious attitudes and practices based on doctrinal, philosophical, political, national, territorial, ethnic, linguistic, and other affiliations, to the extent that analyzing them as one coherent, unified group, with common ideologies and ambitions, including with regard to views on Jews and Judaism, is reductionist and misleading—no less than analyzing the Jews of the continent in such generalizing terms would be.

Second, while the attitudes of certain Muslim individuals and groups should be a cause of concern for European Jews, a great historical irony is that Jewish freedom of religion in Europe has become intertwined with that enjoyed by Muslims. Some of the Islamic rituals and traditions that have been at the core of public debates on Islam in Europe in recent years, such as male circumcision and the slaughtering of animals, are similar to Jewish traditions and rituals. Where the rights of Muslims are affected, those of Jews are affected as well. France,

“I was born in Paris, I like very much the European way of living, and I never considered living here [in Israel. However] it is hard to be a Jew in France today. There are more than seven million Muslims there, on the streets there’s an atmosphere of anti-Semitism, and the government shuts its eyes,” see Rofe-Ofir, Sharon. “Anu Banu,” [“Here We Came,”] *Laisha*, September 29, 2014.

For an in-depth report on the effect of sporadic attacks by Muslims had on Jewish emigration from Europe see A. Lebor, “Exodus: Why Europe’s Jews Are Fleeing Once Again,” *Newsweek*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/08/08/exodus-why-europes-jews-are-fleeing-once-again-261854.html>.

for example, did not legislate a ban specifically against Muslim headscarves. The text of the law approved on March 15, 2004, stated that “in public and secondary schools, wearing signs or clothes by which pupils clearly display a religious affiliation is forbidden.”³ While the legislation was initiated in order to specifically ban *hijabs* and reflected a wider public concern over the increasing presence of Islamic symbols and displays in the public sphere, it also resulted in the banning of certain Jewish skullcaps in state schools. Even where Jews are not directly affected by acts aimed against Muslims, infringements on the rights of another religious minority create dangerous precedents. For who is to assure that the same Swiss electorate that prohibited the building of minarets in one referendum would not prohibit the building of synagogues in another?

Commonality of Interests

As religious minorities who observe traditions that some European liberals and conservatives alike view disparagingly, Jews and Muslims on the continent today have more than monotheism in common. To the extent that their religious heritage matters to them—whether in a devotional, cultural, or folkloristic sense—they have common interests against liberal and populist voices that seek to limit the practice of religious traditions.

In recent years, Jewish and Muslim leaders recognized this commonality on local, national, and transnational levels, leading to dialogues and joint initiatives that do not always attract media attention. The swift and successful action by Jewish and Muslim German organizations to ensure that a June 2012, Cologne court ruling that declared circumcisions illegal would not affect the right to circumcise boys in the country was, perhaps, the finest demonstration that on certain critical issues, Jewish and Muslim agendas are similar and can be best served when advocated together. Leaders from both communities protested against the ban, including in a joint march in Berlin, describing it as a gratuitous infringement on religious freedoms and warning that it would effectively make leading a Jewish or Muslim life in Germany impossible.⁴ The protests led the Ger-

3 J. R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State and Public Space* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 136. On the support for the ban across the French political spectrum and its motivations see *ibid.*, 63–127, and J. Ezekiel, “French Dressing: Race, Gender, and the Hijab History,” *Feminist Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 256–78.

4 Cf. “Juden und Muslime gehen gemeinsam auf die Straße,” *Die Welt*, September 9, 2012, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article109113576/Juden-und-Muslime-gehen-gemeinsam-auf-die-Strasse.html>; B. Weinthal, “Jews, Muslims, Christians Protest Circumcision Ban,” *The Jerusalem*

man parliament, with the active support of the German Chancellor, to approve by an overwhelming majority in December 2012 a law that secured the right to circumcise boys.⁵

Germany's short-lived judicial ban on circumcisions also demonstrated that Jewish European organizations, despite being a minority of far smaller demographic proportions, hold (especially in the German context) greater political leverage than do similar Muslim organizations. While the prospect of a ban on circumcision alarmed Germany's Muslim leaderships, it was the outcries of German, European, and Israeli Jewish leaders, and the concern of German politicians of the reappearance of prejudice against Jews, that encouraged prompt legislative action that ensured the continued legality of circumcisions.⁶

Lessons to Learn from the Jews

The resemblance between Muslims and Jews as minorities in Europe, and the greater ability of Jews to promote as minorities their agendas, has not escaped the notice of a spectrum of Muslim scholars and activists, some based in the Muslim world and some in Europe. In recent years, the notion of "Muslims as the new Jews" has proliferated in deliberations on the future of Islam on the European continent. In stark contrast to the Jewish-Israeli image of European Muslims as a dangerous "other" that threatens European Jewish existence, a plethora of texts written by Muslims presented European Jews as reflections of European Muslims and argued that the Jewish experience provides invaluable lessons for Muslims. Comparisons pointed to the tragic past of the Jews and to their prosperous and secure present to make different points about how Muslim

Post, September 9, 2012, <https://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/Jews-Muslims-Christians-protest-circumcision-ban>; K. Connolly, "Circumcision Ruling Condemned by Germany's Jewish and Muslim Leaders," *The Guardian*, June 27, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/27/circumcision-ruling-germany-muslim-jewish>; J. Kay, "Muslims and Jews Finally Come Together—To Defend Circumcision," *The National Post*, June 27, 2012, <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/jonathan-kay-muslims-and-jews-finally-come-together-to-champion-circumcision>.

⁵ Cf. S. Rashti, "Germany Votes to Keep Circumcision Legal," *The Jewish Chronicle Online*, December 12, 2012, <http://www.thejc.com/news/world-news/94038/germany-votes-keep-circumcision-legal>.

⁶ In July 2012, the German press reported that Angela Merkel warned against Germany becoming the only country in the world where Jews cannot practice their rituals, suggesting it would make Germany a laughing stock, see "Kanzlerin warnt vor Beschneidungs-Verbot," *Bild*, July 16, 2012, <http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/beschneidung/kanzlerin-warnt-vorbeschneidungsverbot-25180102.bild.html>.

minorities in Europe should preserve their religious identity and engage with majority non-Muslim societies. While “Jewish examples” served authors of different orientations, all shared the notion that Muslims in Europe, being socially and politically weak, must study Jewish history in order to learn how to avoid catastrophe on the one hand, and how to improve their condition on the other.

This article offers a qualitative reading of texts in Arabic, English, and German by Muslim essayists, political activists, and religious scholars, which comparatively explore three aspects of Jewish experiences:

- (1) combating hate speech, discrimination, and persecutions;
- (2) striking a balance between integration and preservation of religious identity;
- (3) amassing political influence.

The voices examined are diverse, representing different agendas, different understandings of what it means to be Muslim, particularly a Muslim in the West, and addressing different audiences. As such, they should not be confused as part of one “Muslim” discourse. What they do have in common, however, is the notion that Muslims living in the West face serious challenges and that it is the responsibility of Muslim thinkers to introduce new ideas as to how these challenges can be resolved. The article does not aim to exhaust the corpus of comparative argumentations. Rather, its purpose is to demonstrate the diverse functions which parallelisms with Jewish experiences play in contemporary works on Islam in Europe and the proliferation of such representations on various platforms.

Antisemitism and Islamophobia

In academic and popular discourses, Islamophobia is invoked to denote negative, essentialist approaches to Islam and to Muslims.⁷ ‘Abd al-Jalil Sajid, President of the National Association of British Pakistanis, argued that the term was introduced to reflect a reality of rapid and considerable growth of prejudice and hostility towards Muslims that is based on the stereotype of Muslims as violent religious fanatics who reject concepts such as tolerance and equality.⁸ While the

⁷ For example, C. D. Field, “Islamophobia in Contemporary Britain: The Evidence of Opinion Polls, 1988–2006,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 18, no. 4 (2007): 447–77; H. Afshar, R. Aitken, and M. Franks, “Feminisms, Islamophobia and Identities,” *Political Studies* 53, no. 2 (2005): 263; D. Shumsky, “Post-Zionist Orientalism? Orientalist Discourse and Islamophobia among the Russian-Speaking Intelligentsia in Israel,” *Social Identities* 10, no. 1 (2004): 94.

⁸ Cf. A. Sajid, “Islamophobia: A New Word for an Old Fear,” *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture* 12, no. 2/3 (2005): 31.

term gained prominence in analyses of Western attitudes towards Muslims, particularly Muslim minorities in the West in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, it has been used throughout the twentieth century to denote anti-Muslim attitudes⁹ and has been included in the Oxford English Dictionary since 1997.¹⁰

As any phobia, the one associated with Islam points to an irrational fear; the term thus suggests anti-Muslim sentiments to be a form of illness that should be cured. It is invoked not only to reflect reality but also to protest against it: to alert Europeans and Muslims alike that what may seem to be sporadic incidents are, in fact, a reflection of a social bias that needs to be addressed both educationally and legally, making certain attitudes and actions illegitimate.

Islamophobia was related to a wide range of attitudes and actions, and in some studies was not defined at all, damaging its efficacy as a discursive means to delegitimize prejudice and intolerance. To note but two examples, along with physical attacks against Muslims, Abduljalil Said mentioned “delay and inertia in responding to Muslim requests for cultural sensitivity in education, in healthcare, and in protection against incitement to hatred,” and “curtailment of civil liberties that disproportionately affect Muslims” as forms of Islamophobia.¹¹ Mustafa Abu Sway, a professor of Philosophy and Islamic Studies at al-Quds University, wrote that “ultimately, Islamophobia also comprises prejudice in the media, literature and everyday conversation.”¹² These definitions potentially cover opinions and legislation that do not reflect irrational fears of, or hatred toward, a religious minority. For example, it is true that campaigns against male circumcision, *halal* slaughtering, and *niqabs* have resonated in recent years, at least in part, because of a cultural atmosphere that has become less patient to cultural plurality, especially one that involves Islam. But these campaigns were motivated also by convictions about human rights or animal rights which, whether accepted or rejected, cannot be simply dismissed as representing a “phobia,” that is, as illegitimate.

The comparison of Islamophobia to antisemitism served as an essential argument in a number of discussions on the topic. The equation of the two suggested that contemporary attacks on Muslims and Islam are reincarnations of old and new hatreds against Jews and Judaism. It was introduced for a reason.

⁹ Cf. R. Richardson, *Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism—Or What? Concepts and Terms Revisited*, <http://www.insted.co.uk/anti-muslim-racism.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2014).

¹⁰ Cf. L. P. Sheridan, “Islamophobia Pre- and Post- September 11th, 2001,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 21, no. 3 (2006): 317.

¹¹ Sajid, “Islamophobia,” 31–32.

¹² M. Abu Sway, “Islamophobia: Meaning, Manifestations, Causes,” *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture* 12, no 2/3 (2005): 15.

The mainstreams of Western societies have come to consider antisemitism a complete taboo. As noted by Yascha Mounk, today’s European right-wing, anti-migration populists consciously embrace Philo-Semitic views to ward off accusations of racism.¹³ Thus, no argument about the need to take Islamophobia seriously could be more compelling than its equation with anti-Jewish bigotry. By invoking this comparison, activists and writers cautioned non-Muslims and Muslims alike that if not stopped, discrimination against Muslims can devolve to inhumane criminal acts. The comparison also encouraged Muslims to advocate, as Jews did, for legislation that would criminalize hatred directed against them and urged European governments to treat Islamophobia with the same intolerance with which they treat antisemitism.

The U.K.

One example is a Labor politician of Pakistani extraction, Shadid Malik, who served, at the time, as the MP for Dewsbury (West Yorkshire) and as Minister for International Development in U.K. In 2008, he stirred considerable public interest when pointing to a resemblance between past antisemitic and current anti-Muslim sentiments. Malik revealed that he and his family were victims of attacks directed against them because they are Muslim, including the firebombing of their car. Emphasizing that he does not intend any comparison with the Holocaust, Malik said:

in a way that it was and still is in some parts almost legitimate to target Jews, many Muslims would say that we feel exactly the same way—that somehow there is a message out there that it is OK to target people as they are Muslims.¹⁴

Maleiha Malik, a lecturer in law at King’s College in London, argued that just as antisemitism in Britain portrays a religious minority as a “threat to the nation,” so too does anti-Muslim racism. In both cases, differences arising from religious cultures are pathologized and systematically excluded from definitions of “being British.” Malik suggested that the comparison between the phenomena reveals

¹³ Cf. Y. Mounk, “Europe’s Jewish Problem: The Misunderstood Rise of European Anti-Semitism,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 17, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141990/yascha-mounk/europes-jewish-problem>.

¹⁴ S. Doughty, “We Muslims Are the New Jews’ Says MP Who Has Been Victim of a Hit-and-Run and a Firebomb Attack,” *The Daily Mail*, July 3, 2008, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1031697/We-Muslims-new-Jews-says-MP-victim-hit-run-firebomb-attack.html>.

an alarming recurring pattern in modern British history: the rapid collapse of security fears associated with a particular religious minority is transformed into a racialized discourse of “civilization versus barbarism.” In doing so, she drew a parallel between the pejorative public images of Jewish immigrants who settled in the East End of London at the turn of the century to those of Muslim immigrants today. Just as the Muslims of today, those Jews, a minority visually distinguished by the men’s dark clothes and long beards and the women’s hair-coverings, were depicted as a minority that adhered to a sacred book filled with religious legal strictures and arcane punishments, and supported gender inequality. Politicians warned against the risks of their self-segregation, and while only a minority among them affiliated with extremist anarchist and Bolshevik groups, an alarm was raised about the entire community.¹⁵

Several writers cautioned that should anti-Muslim sentiments in the West not be curbed, the situation could even deteriorate to another Holocaust, only this time against Muslims. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a British essayist of Indian-Ugandan descent who frequently comments on migration and multiculturalism, argued, in an article critical of the Muslim Council of Britain’s decision not to participate in the national Holocaust Memorial Day service, that “today, the new Jews of Europe are Muslims.” Noting that the Germans who led the extermination of Jews were highly cultured and educated, no less than today’s Europeans, she stated that there are no guarantees that history would not be repeated:

Since the organized massacres of Muslim males in Bosnia, we 16 million European Muslims live with a menacing whirr at the back of the head, ghostly fears that the fires next time will burn with our bodies. We are today’s despised “other,” blamed for all the ills of the world which is still largely controlled by Christians. We have to atone ceaselessly for the Taliban and al-Qaida and home-grown men of violence. We are expected—just as Jews were in the thirties—to bend our heads and take the slurs, looks of hatred, to accept the burden of shame. By remembering the Holocaust with past victims, we remind ourselves of what could happen in the future.¹⁶

Ziyad al-Dris, the Saudi ambassador to UNESCO, offered an equally strong warning about a looming tragedy. Writing in the pan-Arab daily newspaper *al-Hayat*, al-Dris defined Islamophobia as a phenomenon that is based on three core pejorative concepts: Islam is organically tied to violence; inherently contradicts de-

¹⁵ Cf. M. Malik, “Muslims Are Now Getting the Same Treatment Jews Had a Century Ago,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/feb/02/comment.religion1>.

¹⁶ Y. Alibhai-Brown, “Why Muslims Must Remember the Holocaust,” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2006.

mocracy; and is entirely inimical to secularism. He suggested that a number of principle motivations encourage Western anti-Muslim sentiments: (a) concerns that migration waves and changing demographic balances would result in the Islamizing of Western societies; (b) the masking, at times unconscious, of ethnic racism in religious terms; and (c) efforts to divert attention from the crimes committed by the Zionists against the Palestinians. Al-Dris admitted that two distinct types of Muslim groups had contributed to the rise of Islamophobia: extremist movements that apply terror under the banner of Islam and inevitably create sentiments of fear, especially among people who do not know what Islam really stands for, and certain Muslim commentators who have become regular guests on certain talk shows and, under the guise of experts with insider knowledge, spread fears by arguing that violence is rooted in Islam. Relying on Western commentators who hold that anti-Muslim sentiments in the West have surpassed antisemitic ones, al-Dris concluded his essay by presenting the rhetorical question of whether Islamophobia is a means to prepare European societies for a new Holocaust—only this time, one committed against Muslims.¹⁷

Germany

The corollary between antisemitism and Islamophobia served as a basis for calls to change policies and to treat the two phenomena in the same manner. For example, the German-Muslim essayist, Kassem Mohsen, demanded Germans fight anti-Muslim sentiments with the same seriousness that they fight anti-Jewish ones. He argued that just as Holocaust denial has been criminalized, and justifiably so, forms of intolerance towards other religions should also be outlawed. As an example, Mohsen invoked the murder of the Egyptian Marwa al-Sharbini, a German-Egyptian pharmacist and Islamic activist who was stabbed to death in a Dresden court in 2009 by Alex Wiens, a German immigrant from Russia, against whom she had testified in a criminal case for verbally abusing her during a quarrel at a playground. Mohsen protested against what he considered the mild coverage of that particular hate-crime in the media. He argued that had a Jew been murdered by a neo-Nazi following a quarrel at a playground, the German press—particularly the Axel Springer press (publisher of the mass-circulation *Bild*, which is exceptionally pro-Israel and harshly critical of any expressions

17 Cf. Z. al-Dris, “‘al-Khawf min al-Islam’ wa al-‘Ada’ lil-Samiyya’: Iydilujjiyya Manfa’a wa Tha-qafat Ibtizaz – Hal Tumahhidu al-Islamofubiyya ila’ Holocaust min Naw’ Akhar?,” [“The Fear of Islam and Anti-Semitism: A Beneficial Ideology and a Culture of Extortion—Will Islamophobia Lead to a New Kind of Holocaust?”] *al-Hayat*, September 27, 2010.

of antisemitism)—would have reported on the crime for months on months, treating it as a major news story.¹⁸ Parallels such as the ones drawn by Mohsen are not common in the German discourse on minority rights, in which participants are usually careful to avoid any relativization of antisemitism.¹⁹ It is thus, perhaps, not surprising that Mohsen based much of his argument on an essay written by a senior German historian of the Holocaust, Wolfgang Benz, who drew a parallel between the portrayal of Jews as “enemies of the public” in the late nineteenth century and the similar portrayal of Muslims in contemporary times, suggesting both to be the products of hysteria and manipulation.²⁰

France

Sa'ïd al-Lawindi, a former correspondent of *al-Ahram* in Paris, who resided in the French capital for eighteen years and earned his PhD from the Sorbonne, dealt extensively with anti-Muslim sentiments in a book he published in 2006. He argued against the biased realities in Europe, in which Muslims are discriminated against and exposed to vicious attacks, but it is unlawful to deny the Holocaust,²¹ and in which Muslim headscarves are banned but the religious headcoverings of other religions are not.²² In an opinion column he published in *al-Ahram* on the occasion of his book's publication, al-Lawindi urged Muslims to follow the example of Jews and more assertively stand against discrimination. Whereas Muslims settle for expressing sorrow for being persecuted, he wrote, the Jews had launched campaigns leading the Europeans not only to express regret for what they had done to the Jews in the past but also to pay reparations and to criminalize the denial of the Jewish Holocaust. Muslims, suggested al-Lawindi,

18 Cf. K. Muhsen, “Hetzer mit Parallelen,” <http://muslim-essay.de/archiv/hetzer-mit-parallelen.html> [no longer available].

19 On the sensitivity of the comparison in German society, see G. Margalit, “On Being Other in Post-Holocaust Germany—German-Turkish Intellectuals and the German Past,” in *Juden und Muslime in Deutschland: Recht, Religion, Identität*, ed. J. Brunner and S. Lavi (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 223. Margalit described the dismissal of Faruk Şen, the director of the Center for Turkish Studies in Essen, who wrote about the discrimination Turkish migrants face in Europe and referred to them as “Europe’s new Jews.”

20 W. Benz, “Antisemiten und Islamfeinde: Hetzer mit Parallelen,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/antisemiten-und-islamfeinde-hetzer-mit-parallelen-1.59486>.

21 Cf. S. al-Lawindi, *Fubiya al-Islam fi al-Gharb [Islamophobia in the West]* (Cairo: Kitab al-Yawm, 2006), 87–98.

22 Cf. *Ibid.*, 109.

should stop weeping and wailing and campaign for the criminalization of Islamophobia. The matter, he stressed, was all the more serious because while anti-Muslim sentiments were directed against Arab and Muslim migrants, they could, in the future, be directed against Muslims in majority Muslim countries as well.²³

Calls for joint Muslim-Jewish action against the discrimination of both groups were also introduced. In 2008, Muslim activists and scholars, some based in Europe and some in Muslim countries, signed an open letter for dialogue initiated by the Cambridge-based Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations. They pointed to the great respect one finds in the Quran and the Prophetic traditions for Jews, as well as to the need to properly contextualize verses and traditions that are hostile. The signatories (including the prolific and controversial Oxford-based Islamic theorist Tariq Ramadan) emphasized that Muslims and Jews in Europe should rise above the sentiments stirred by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, recognize that their religions have a history of positive encounters, and realize that with the increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia, they “need to develop joint strategies to tackle discrimination.”²⁴

Jewish Identity, Muslim Identity

A main theme in works that aim to construct Muslim identities in the West has been the need to strike a balance between preservation of religious identity and integration into majority non-Muslim societies. Opinions on what “Muslim identity” stands for in terms of norms and duties varies greatly—from liberals such as Bassam Tibi, who calls for religion to remain a cultural-spiritual private matter,²⁵ to preachers such as Amr Khaled, who asks Muslims to be ambassadors of goodwill while emphasizing integration and volunteer work as Islamic duties,²⁶ to Islamists, Salafis, and others, who depict Muslim migrants as potential missionaries and largely legitimize their presence in the West based on the hope that their presence there would benefit the larger interests of Islam. However, with the ex-

²³ Cf. S. al-Lawindi, “al-Islamofubiyya wa Mu’adat al-Samiyya: Muqaranat Wajiba,” [“Islamophobia and Antisemitism: Essential Parallelisms,”] *al-Ahram*, May 8, 2006.

²⁴ Bismillah Ar Rahman Ar Rahim, “An Open Letter: A Call to Peace, Dialogue and Understanding between Muslims and Jews,” *European Judaism* 41, no. 1 (2008): 148–54.

²⁵ Cf. B. Tibi, *Der Islam und Deutschland: Muslime in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 22–23, 265–75.

²⁶ Cf. A. Khaled, *Integration im Islam: Über die Rolle der Muslime in Europa* (Karlsruhe: Andalusia, 2005), 16–26.

ception of Salafi voices, all participants in this discussion envision Muslim minorities as constructive contributors to their receiving states and encourage their audiences to develop friendships with non-Muslims and to promote the welfare of their societies. (In fact, a careful reading of Salafi texts suggests that they, too, do not close the door to engagements with non-Muslims, provided that these have an Islamic context. They also stress the importance of abiding by the laws of the land as an Islamic norm and interest).²⁷

The Jewish experience in Europe (and other diasporas) offers two distinct attitudes to the challenge of integration. Orthodox Jews, largely secluded in enclaves, limited their interpersonal relations with non-Jews and refrained from teaching their children non-religious sciences or exposing them to secular literature. Enlightened modern Jews, the forefathers of the modern secular Jews, integrated into non-Jewish societies, learned secular topics, and entered non-traditional professions while struggling to preserve some of their practices and seeking Jewish education for their offspring. Both examples were introduced by Muslim authors to support different arguments on the character Muslim integration should assume.

Emulating the Ghetto Jew

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the more prolific and influential contemporary Sunni-Arab jurists and theologians, first addressed the need to strengthen the religious identity of Muslim minorities in the West in 1960 in his first major work *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, an introduction to Islamic law that became a bestseller throughout the Muslim world but was originally commissioned as a textbook for Muslim migrants.²⁸ In the late 1990s, he began to develop a systematic legal doctrine for Muslim minorities, *fiqh al-aqalliyat al-Muslima*, which legitimized, and even encouraged,²⁹ permanent residence in non-Muslim lands and endeavored to accommodate certain *shar‘i* restrictions to the unique circum-

²⁷ For a discussion see U. Shavit, “Can Muslims Befriend non-Muslims? Debating *al-walā’ wal-barā’* (Loyalty and Disavowal) in Theory and Practice,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 25, no. 1 (2014): 71–78.

²⁸ Cf. Y. al-Qaradawi, *al-Halal wal-haram fi al-Islam* [*The Permissible and Prohibited in Islam*] (Cairo: Matkabat Wahaba, 2004), 9–11.

²⁹ Cf. Y. al-Qaradawi, *Fi fiqh al-aqalliyat al-Muslima* [*On the Religious Law of Muslim Minorities*] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2006), 17.

stances Muslim minorities experience, while at the same strengthening their religious identity and tasking them with proselytizing among non-Muslims.³⁰

As part of his theorizing, al-Qaradawi suggested that it is crucial for Muslims living in the West to concentrate in enclave-neighborhoods as a means to develop and protect religious-communal life. This idea first appeared in al-Qaradawi’s scholarship in a groundbreaking *fatwa* issued by the European Council for Fatwa and Research in October 1999, which conditionally legitimized taking mortgages in Europe. As one of several justifications, the Council, which he heads, invoked the need to make it possible for Muslims to reside in proximity to a mosque, an Islamic center, an Islamic school, and other Muslims, in a way that will create “a small Islamic community within the greater [non-Islamic] society,” strengthen the bonds between members the community, and facilitate their living in accordance with the norms of Islam.³¹

In an article al-Qaradawi published in 2012, he repeated the idea that to protect their religious identity, Muslim minorities in the West should create enclaves in cities and towns and establish their own religious, educational, and recreational institutions. He explained that Muslims need to establish “their own small community within the larger community,” lest “they would melt into the larger community the very way salt melts into water.”³² In support of this concept, al-Qaradawi introduced Jewish experience:

Undoubtedly, what preserved the Jewish identity throughout past history is that the Jews maintained their own small community that is distinguished for its own thoughts and rituals, that is the “Jewish ghetto,” so Muslims should work hard to establish their own “Muslim ghetto.”

Al-Qaradawi’s example is reductionist. It idealized a complex and often tragic past, neglecting to mention that ghettos were established because orthodox Jews were required, by the Christian authorities, to confine themselves in segre-

30 For an overview, see U. Shavit, *Islamism and the West: From “Cultural Attack” to “Missionary Migrant”* (London: Routledge, 2014), 152–60.

31 I. M. Imam, “Fatwa Tujizu Shira’ al-Manazil bi-Qarḍ Ribawi lil-Muslimin fi Ghayr Bilad al-Islam,” [“A Religious Decision Permitting Muslims in non-Muslim Countries to Purchase Homes through Mortgages,”] *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 3, 1999, 25; Y. al-Qaradawi, “Shira’ Buyut al-Sukna fi al-Gharb ‘an Ṭariq al-Bunuk,” [Purchasing Homes through Banks in the West] in *ibid.*, *Fi Fiqh al-Aqalliyyat al-Muslima [On the Religious Law of Muslim Minorities]*, 176–77. See also in al-Qaradawi’s defense of the *fatwa*, *ibid.*, 160.

32 Y. al-Qaradawi, “Muslim Minorities and Politics,” issued April 20, 2012, <http://www.onislam.net/english/shariah/contemporary-issues/critiques-and-thought/456871-muslim-minorities-and-politics.html?Thought> [no longer available].

gated areas, along with other restrictions intended to humiliate them or to prevent their participation in certain occupations. It also failed to note the heavy price Orthodox Jewish communities paid for their segregation in terms of social progress and financial opportunities. However, his purpose was not to provide a historical account but to argue that minorities can only protect their religious identity by implementing a certain measure of segregation.

This by no means implies that al-Qaradawi asks Muslims in the West to withdraw from their majority non-Muslim societies. His doctrine for Muslim minorities, as constructed since the 1990s, recognizes the importance of engaging with non-Muslims and positively contributing to their societies. Drawing on this conviction, his call for the creation of “Muslim ghettos” was followed by a definitive statement that isolation from non-Muslims is not the intention of his call, as that would amount to “lifelessness”; instead, openness that does not lead to assimilation is required.³³

Emulating the Prosperous Jew

Read in this sense, al-Qaradawi’s comparison is not as radically different, as it may appear at first, from the comparison between Jewish and Muslim integration in France that al-Lawindi, the former *al-Ahram* correspondent in Paris introduced, as was discussed above. Al-Lawindi’s book was critical of Muslim minorities for failing to find a way to incorporate their religious identity with the conventions of Western societies and argued that in order to integrate in a meaningful way they must neglect some practices and traditions. He described the legal case of an Algerian immigrant who, upon discovering his nineteen-year-old daughter alone at home with a French friend from university, brutally beat her in his state of fury. The friend jumped from the window and called the police. The judge expressed understanding for the father’s different background and values. However, he told the father that because he chose to leave his country and become part of another society, he should assimilate into that society and become part of its social fabric. If he does not desire that, then the door is open for him to return to his country of origin. Al-Lawindi agreed with the judge’s viewpoint. As in other societies, he wrote, French society achieved its current social balances and structure after many struggles. Moreover, French society has

³³ Ibid.

the right to defend these social balances and structures from external viewpoints.³⁴

This does not mean that Muslim minorities should give up their beliefs and norms. Rather, al-Lawindi called on them to integrate to a limited extent. Thus, Muslim minorities should integrate to such a degree that enables them to not distance themselves from their roots while also ensuring they are not perceived as alien by Westerners. A middle ground must be found. According to al-Lawindi, the Jewish experience demonstrates that a middle path can be found between the preservation of religious identity and integration into Western societies. Whereas al-Qaradawi was impressed with the Ghetto Jew, al-Lawindi was impressed with the enlightened Jew, who demonstrates how to integrate without losing those aspects of religious identity that *really* matter. He wrote:

In this context, comes to mind the Jewish model which reinforces the validity of establishing harmony between “me” and the “other,” especially if the two live together. Hence, Jewish intelligence has inspired the Jews themselves and convinced them to live as Jews in their homes and as European citizens in public!

There is no question that the success which the Jewish Diaspora achieved in Europe and the United States is inspired by such a conviction. Additionally, the unity and concordance may be reflected by the unions of Jewish organizations which enjoy political importance at the international level and which are highly respected and followed even in the narrower decision-making circles in the world.

The beauty here lies in the fact that the Jews living in the Diaspora seem as if they have assimilated completely in public. Thus, they are ordinary citizens who are subject to every law and regulation that original citizens are subject to. However, the moment they return to their apartments they take off this mask to re-integrate themselves with the life they grew up with and always knew. They eat, wear, listen to music and watch films, celebrate religious or non-religious ceremonies as they choose and see fit, without disturbing others in any way.³⁵

The Jewish Enlightened Model

As with al-Qaradawi’s analysis, al-Lawindi’s enchantment with the achievements of enlightened Jewish communities is reductionist. It does not mention the antisemitism that intensified in the late nineteenth and twentieth century in part as a response to the integration of emancipated, modern Jews in previously banned educational and professional fields. Neither does it acknowledge

³⁴ Cf. al-Lawindi, *Fubya al-Islam fi al-Gharb*, 135–36.

³⁵ Al-Lawindi, *Fubya al-Islam fi al-Gharb*, 136–37.

that for more than a few Jewish families, integration was the precursor to complete assimilation and even conversion to Christianity.

For al-Lawindi, the Jewish enlightened model holds only advantages, and thus he believes it is regrettable that Egyptians, and Arabs in general, who reside in the West, do “exactly the opposite” of what European Jews do. In their homes, he wrote, “they do everything foreigners do, without any reservations or precautions as regards to food and drink, as well as other European habits, while only in public they remember that they are Muslim Arabs!” The Arabs in the West, he continued, “make all effort to put barriers between themselves and the customs of the country in which they live.” They wear robes, put on hoods, wear beards, and cover their heads “until they look as if they have just come to live or even to visit the country, while the truth is that they have been living there for tens of years.” By this practice, they believe that they are protecting themselves against assimilation or integration—but they are wrong. In fact, these patterns of behavior would never “protect their identity or protect them from assimilation of any kind.” The correct behavior, as suggested by the Jewish example, is to remove the barriers that separate Muslim minorities from the majorities while practicing their “culture and religion without difficulties or fabrication” only inside their homes.³⁶

Jewish Politics, Muslim Politics

Another comparative theme in a number of Muslim reflections on the future of Muslims in the West is the relationship between Jews in the Diaspora and the Zionist enterprise. Inspired by the Jewish example, several Muslim authors suggested that Muslims should lobby for the rights of Muslims and the Muslim nation in a way similar to how Jews advocate for various Zionist causes. This notion began to resonate in the early 1980s, a time when the permanent nature of Muslim presence in the West became evident. In 1984, Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917–1996), one of the most prolific and influential Islamist writers in the second half of the twentieth century, wrote a comprehensive treatise on the future of Muslim minorities in the West. While his book cautioned against the danger of assimilation, he also suggested that with the assistance of Muslim states and the creation of educational and communal Islamic institutions, Muslim minorities would be able to not only preserve their identities but also to spread Islam among non-Muslims. His conceptualization of migrants as potential advocates of the greater

³⁶ Ibid.

Islamic cause was inspired, in part, by the example of the scientist and Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952) and his successful endeavors that yielded the Balfour Declaration (the British commitment in 1917 for a Jewish national home in Palestine).

Al-Ghazali, in a fervor reminiscent of Zionist textbooks, wrote that Weizmann was an organic chemistry professor at the University of Manchester, who in 1916 resourcefully invented a method to produce acetone from corn flour that salvaged the war effort of the Allied Forces because they desperately needed vast quantities of that liquid, which dissolved nitroglycerin and nitrocellulose in the manufacturing of explosives used in bullets and shells. When asked what he wanted in exchange for his brilliant invention, Weizmann refused any monetary compensation that would allow him to buy “a mansion or build a house decorated with mosaics and ornaments,” as he believed in “his people’s lie (their claim over Palestine) as an ideology worthy of sacrificing all materialistic possessions.” Instead of wealth or fame for himself, Weizmann implored the British leadership to pass the Balfour Declaration.

For al-Ghazali, the image of Weizmann as a scientific prodigy, whose genius advanced his people, summarized the Muslim tragedy of recent generations: “This Jewish scientist served his tribesmen and tribe! He thought of his people and not of himself, served his faith and not his desires, and used his scientific gift to unite the dispersed believers of his faith.” One cannot find people like the first President of Israel among Muslims, argued al-Ghazali; some Muslims are hungry for respect, only interested in ruling over states established on the ruins of the Caliphate. Some are godless scientists, whose sole aim in conducting research is accumulating wealth for themselves and their children. And some are devoutly religious, whose lives revolve around trifles, modesty and over-purification, not acknowledging the importance of science.³⁷

Whereas al-Ghazali was fascinated with an example from the early twentieth century, others pointed to the contemporary relations between Jewish diaspora communities and the state of Israel as a model that should be emulated. They described the strong bonds between Jewish communities and the Jewish state and the effective political lobbying of those communities on behalf of Israel. While fascination with Jewish political organizations was not limited to Islamist-inclined thinkers, it gained traction in their writing in particular, as it conformed to their belief that Islam should be the primary reference that defines the identity of Muslim minorities and legitimizes their residence in the West.

37 M. al-Ghazali, *Mustaqbal al-Islam Kharij Ardihi: Kayfa Nufakkiru Fih* [*The Future of Islam outside Its Boundaries: How to Conceptualize It*] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1997), 72–74.

Three years before al-Ghazali published his treatise, Hassan Muhammad Hassan argued, in a book on the means to combat the expansion of Western cultural dominance in the Muslim world, that Muslims residing in the West must promote Islamic interests, much like the Jews do for Zionist interests. He emphasized that Jewish prominence in the United States is due to their high participation rates in elections and astute organizing,³⁸ and suggested funding Islamic summer camps for youths similar to the Zionist camps that take place in Israel. Hassan recalled Jewish students he had met while studying in New York, who embarked on short or prolonged visits to the “Zionist entity” where they defended and worked on *Kibbutzim*, earning less than they would have at home. Upon their return to America, they were filled with pride and the desire to spread Zionist ideology.³⁹ Expressing a similar sentiment in the late 1990s, Palestinian historian ‘Abd al-Fattah al-‘Awaisi, pointed to the contribution that the Jewish lobby in Great Britain made to the establishment of Israel. Accordingly, he called for the Arab-Islamic lobby in Britain to mobilize, “by all legitimate means,” in order to shape history.⁴⁰

Following the Jewish Example

Legitimizing the permanent residence of Muslims in the West in his systematic treatise on the religious law of Muslim minorities, al-Qaradawi suggested that the Islamic presence in the West is important in order to not leave it entirely under Jewish influence as but one justification of his argument.⁴¹ In a short *fatwa* he published in 2006, which methodically and succinctly summarized his position on the duties of Muslim minorities, al-Qaradawi called on the immigrants to follow the Jewish example by adopting and championing the rights of their nation:

Such kind of duty involves championing the cause of Palestine, Iraq, Kosovo, Chechnya (and other places where Muslims are facing great ordeals), with the sincere intention to return the usurped rights to their legitimate owner. Nowadays we see the Jews, from the four

38 Cf. H. M. Hassan, *Wasa'il Muqawamat al-Ghazw al-Fikri lil-'Alam al-Islami* [*The Means of Combating the Ideological Invasion to the Islamic World*] (Mecca: Rabitat al-'Alam al-Islami, 1981), 110–11.

39 Cf. *ibid.*, 179–89.

40 ‘A. al-Fattah al-‘Awaisi, “Dawr Baritaniya fi Ta’sis al-Dawla al-Yahudiyya 1840–1948,” [“The Role of Britain in Establishing the Jewish State, 1840–1948,”] *Filastin al-Muslima* (May 1998): 22–28.

41 Cf. Y. al-Qaradawi, *Fi Fiqh al-'aqqaliyyat al-Muslima*, 33.

corners of the world, championing and backing Israel, and we call on all Muslims in all parts of the world, saying that it is high time to champion the rights of their Muslim *umma*.⁴²

At times the impression cannot be avoided that the anticipation for the creation of a “Muslim lobby,” which would counter Jewish lobbies, is an external one, projected from the outside on local Muslim leaderships that have other priorities.⁴³ A demanding tone is common to writings on the matter by authors based in Muslim countries, as if working to benefit “greater Muslim causes” and emulating Jewish lobbying methods is something that is only to be expected of Muslims in the West, a test, so to speak, of the religious credentials of those minorities. These expectations ignore several differences between the two cases. First, Jewish lobbying is directed toward one nation-state, of which a majority of Jews in the Diaspora are supportive (even when critical of specific policies). A Muslim state, on the other hand, does not exist other than as a conceptual ideal, and the transnational political interests of Muslims living in the West are largely related to their ethnic and territorial affiliations, rendering a consensus on priorities and policies almost impossible. Second, some Muslims find the very notions of “Muslim politics” or the “Muslim nation” ideologically resentful. Third, the effectiveness of Jewish lobbying, particularly in the United States, is due in no small part to the wealth and professional status of individuals, to which there is, at present, no sufficient equivalent among Muslim minorities.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Muslims who actually live in the West are more conscious about these differences than scholars and activists who are external observers. One example is the explanation offered in 2002 for the weakness of the “Muslim lobby” in the United States by the Eritrean-American ‘Abd al-Rahman al-‘Amudi, a founder and chairman of the American Muslim Council,

42 Y. al-Qaradawi, “Duties of Muslims Living in the West,” issued May 7, 2006, www.oinislam.net [no longer available].

43 To note one example, in 2009, Fatma ‘Abd al-Jabar, the President of Harvard’s Muslim Youth Association and an Obama 2008 activist, gave an interview to *al-Ahram*. Responding to a question, she noted, as a matter of fact, that there exists no Muslim equivalent to the Jewish lobby and some are endeavoring to create one. The rest of the interview dealt with other issues. However, it was given the title: “Faitna ‘Abd al-Jabar: The American Muslim Youth Aspire to Create a Strong Muslim Lobby,” see A. Sayyid, “Faitna ‘Abd al-Jabar: Al-Shabab al-Amriki al-Muslim Yah-lumu bi-Wujud Lubi Islami Qawi,” [“Faitna ‘Abd al-Jabar: American Muslim Youth Dream of a Strong Islamic Lobby,”] *al-Ahram*, September 29, 2009, <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/articles.aspx?Serial=78273&eid=90> [no longer available].

an advocacy organization.⁴⁴ In an interview entitled “Is it possible to create a Muslim lobby in America?,” al-‘Amudi noted that a Jewish Zionist lobby had operated in the United States since 1950, whereas a Muslim lobby was initiated only in 1990; that Muslims in America are extracted from different countries, resulting in different priorities, and in any case their main focus at the present time should not be international politics but American society itself, particularly its social problems; and that Muslims cannot match Jewish fundraising. He quoted a congressman who told him that the Jewish lobby contributed 45 percent of his campaign budget and asked whether the Muslim lobby can make the same contribution. Politics, concluded al-‘Amudi, are all about who pays more. Shifting the burden of responsibility, he called on Arab regimes to allocate their funding to initiatives in the West in more efficient ways.⁴⁵

Conclusion

This paper has examined the writings of a number of contemporary Muslim scholars, essayists, and activists who have introduced a variety of comparisons between Jewish and Muslim experiences in the West and which appear to support different lines of arguments. The Jewish example was invoked to caution that Western societies and Muslim minorities alike should take anti-Muslim sentiments more seriously, to encourage educational and legal actions against manifestations of such sentiments, and to protest against perceived Western privileging of Jewish sensitivities. Parallelisms were invoked to advocate for the creation of enclave societies as a means to preserve religious identity but also to advocate for integration and for the need to neglect some manifestations of religiosity in the public sphere. Finally, comparisons to Jewish realities were invoked as a means to encourage Muslim minorities to unite politically in ways that would benefit Muslim interests. However, as is often the case of comparative analyses that are intended to make ideological points, readings of Jewish pasts and presents were reductionist and simplistic, and some entirely ignored the complexity of different aspects of Jewish and Muslim experiences.

⁴⁴ In 2004, al-‘Amudi was sentenced to twenty-three years of imprisonment for illegal dealings with Libya that involved a plot to assassinate the Saudi King; his lawyer stated he was a victim of other conspirators, see J. Markon, “Muslim Activist Sentenced for 23 Years for Libya Contacts,” *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2004.

⁴⁵ Cf. M. J. ‘Arafa, “Hal Yumkin Takwin Lubi Islami fi Amrika?” [“Is the Creation of an Islamic Lobby in America Feasible?”] issued September 7, 2002, accessed September 5, 2014. <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=7953>.

Yet, common to all comparisons is a sense of comfort one finds in learning that another has already experienced similar difficulties and prevailed. To be a Muslim in Europe today is a challenge. In Jewish history, Muslims find reasons for great alarm but also hope for a better future. To quote the words of a Muslim-British writer in a student magazine:

Learning Jewish history will not only untangle many of the stereotypes that unfortunately many Muslims in the West still have, but it will also help them see some of their own experiences reflected in another minority. This will give them the sense that they are not alone, which it can often feel like.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ U. Butt, “What Western Muslims can Learn from Jewish History,” issued May 2, 2012, <http://www.catch21.co.uk/2013/05/what-western-muslims-can-learn-from-jewish-history> [no longer available].

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