

Mahmoud Abbas: “Sorry If People Were Offended”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



On April 30, Mahmoud Abbas addressed the opening session of the Palestinian National Council in Ramallah. This is the 13th year of his four-year term, and he thought it was time. Among other things, in his 90-minute speech he delivered himself of his thoughts on “the Jews.” These were so appalling that even *The New York Times* called for his resignation after his “vile” speech.

Abbas noted that the Jews in eastern and western Europe had been periodically subjected to massacres over the centuries, culminating in the Holocaust.

“But why did this used to happen?” he asked. “They say, ‘It is because we are Jews.’ I will bring you three Jews, with three books who say that enmity towards Jews was not because of their religious identity but because of their social function.”

“This is a different issue. So the Jewish question that was widespread throughout Europe was not against their religion but against their social function which relates to usury [unscrupulous money-lending] and banking and such.”

This is one of the oldest charges made by antisemites in the West (Muslim antisemitism has a different basis). It was the “Jewish bankers” whom Henry Ford, America’s most powerful antisemite, railed against in his paper, *The Dearborn Independent*. Jewish bankers, in this view, were scheming manipulators (apparently non-Jewish bankers were splendid fellows, working only for the good of humanity), whom Ford insisted had fomented so many conflicts, including World War I, in order to be in a position to make money from all sides, by lending at extortionate rates to the warring parties. Indeed, Ford published a four-volume set of antisemitic pamphlets under the collective title “The International Jew.”

Before Ford’s “International Jew,” but similarly focused on the theme of powerful, scheming Jews, was the antisemitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which purported to be the record of a secret meeting where powerful Jews laid out their plans for creating a global Jewish hegemony by subverting the morals of Gentiles, and by controlling the press and the world’s economies.

What Mahmoud Abbas said about Jews as financiers and bankers who were persecuted, even slaughtered, because of what he called their “social function,” is standard-issue antisemitism in the West.

Perhaps Abbas, in the heat of his rambling rant in Ramallah, temporarily forgot he was being recorded, or more likely, since what he said there was not greatly different from what he has said or written before, he didn’t think his latest remarks would cause much trouble. After all, Mahmoud Abbas had managed to survive the accusations of Holocaust denial based on his 1982 doctoral dissertation, entitled “The

Other Side: The Secret Relationship Between Nazism and Zionism." In that dissertation, he had claimed that the figure of six million Jews killed in the Holocaust had been grossly inflated (presumably to increase sympathy for Jews) and that before World War II, the "Zionist" leadership had even cooperated with the Nazis.

Abbas, who called his latest speech a "history lesson," mentioned an agreement whereby Adolf Hitler facilitated the immigration of Jews to Mandatory Palestine. In that short-lived arrangement, over 60,000 German Jews immigrated to Palestine during the 1930s, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. While Holocaust deniers, like Abbas, say the agreement showed collaboration between the Nazis and Zionist leaders, such Holocaust historians as Deborah Lipstadt and Rainer Schulze say it was a narrow, cynical agreement on the Nazis' part, agreed upon by a desperate Zionist group in an attempt to save as many Jewish lives as possible at a time of increasing German persecution.

Abbas also said that most of Europe's Jews stayed put because they thought their money was more important than their lives. They "opted for murder and slaughter" by the Nazis over emigration to British-held Palestine.

This remark is both cruel and ignorant. Europe's Jews, in fact, did not "stay put" voluntarily. They did not opt "for murder and slaughter" by the Nazis in Europe where, Abbas claimed, they remained, those money-grubbers whom he suggested were willing to risk their lives by remaining, in order to hold onto their property. How, and where, could those millions of Jews have fled? If you were a Jew in Eastern Europe, or in France, or other countries not yet conquered by the Germans, perhaps you would continue to believe that mass murders of Jews was mere rumor. For many Jews, by the time they realized what the Nazis intended, it was too late for them to flee. Only a handful were being admitted to other countries. In particular, those who tried to make it to Palestine, the one

place that certainly ought to have been open to them as their refuge, found the ships transporting them were stopped before they could reach their destination and unload their desperate human cargo. They were turned back by the British who, in order to please the Arabs (for whom Hitler was a popular favorite), had committed themselves by a White Paper of 1939 to admit only 15,000 Jews a year – for five years – into Palestine. Many Jews – some estimates suggest as many as a million – might have been saved had the British not been so eager to curry favor with the Arabs. But that's not something any Arab leader, least of all Abbas, has had the decency to recognize.

Abbas has also made astonishing claims in the past about the murderous malevolence of Jews. In 2016, he made apparently unscripted remarks to the European Parliament, where he said that “a number of rabbis in Israel made a clear declaration and asked their government to poison water to kill the Palestinians.” This may be considered a Muslim variant on the old charge about Jews soaking matzoh in the blood of Christian children.

He gave no source for the accusation, but said it was part of a wider Israeli campaign of incitement against Palestinians. His office later admitted the claim was baseless and retracted it.

When Abbas was this time called out, not just by Israeli and Jewish leaders, but by the E.U., by the U.N., by Germany, by the United States, he issued a curious apology.

The apology consisted of two parts. First, “If people were offended by my statement in front of the PNC, especially people of the Jewish faith, I apologize to them,” Abbas said in the statement. “I would like to assure everyone that it was not my intention to do so, and to reiterate my full respect for the Jewish faith, as well as other monotheistic faiths.”

Second, he said that he condemned the Holocaust as a “heinous crime,” the “most heinous crime in history.” Of course, to be mollified by his condemning the Holocaust is certainly setting the bar abysmally low. No one thought at the time of his denunciation of the Holocaust – it did occur to some later on – to bring up Abbas’s long record of writing about the mass murder of European Jewry and, in particular, his grotesque claim of collusion between Zionists and Nazis, and his contributing to that form of Holocaust denial that consists in claiming that the number of Jewish dead has been deliberately exaggerated in order to win sympathy for the Jews, the Zionist Jews, in Israel.

An apology for such matters means little. Abbas did not, after all, say he was wrong in his statements about Jewish behavior as the cause of European persecution of Jews. He only said that he apologized if he’d offended anyone, which he claims was not his intention. He certainly didn’t intend to offend his audience of fellow “Palestinians” with his claims about Jews: they lapped it up.

Now that the issue of his antisemitic remarks has been brought to the world’s attention, and even *the New York Times* has called on him to resign – “Let Abbas’s vile words be his last as Palestinian leader” – this would be a good time to publicly ask Mahmoud Abbas some questions to discover what, in fact, he believes to be the truth about Jews and the Holocaust. Think of it as, for all of us, a teaching moment.

Here are a few such questions that come swimmingly to mind:

Mr. Abbas, do you think antisemitism in Europe is a result of what Jews did, or was it the mere fact that they were Jews? Are you aware that the chief reason that some Jews became money-lenders in the Middle Ages was that they were providing a needed service, given that the Catholic Church forbade charging interest? Do you accept that 99% of Europe’s Jews had nothing to do with finance or banking in the medieval period,

but Jews were the objects of massacres just the same, as “Christ-killers”?

In your doctoral dissertation in 1982, “The Other Side: the Secret Relationship Between Nazism and Zionism” (Arabic: al-Wajh al-Akhar: al-‘Alaqat as-Sirriya bayna an-Naziya wa’s-Sihyuniya), which was published in 1984 in Arabic, President Abbas, you claimed that the number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust had been exaggerated. That is a charge often made by Holocaust deniers – that the numbers have been exaggerated in order to win sympathy for Jews. Do you now accept the figure of six million murdered Jews, a figure that reputable historians unanimously agree on?

In the late 1930s, the British, who controlled Mandatory Palestine, in order to win Arab support against the Axis, decided to limit Jewish immigration to Palestine to 15,000 Jews annually, for five years. That is why the British turned back ships loaded with refugees bound for Palestine, and why, in many cases, Jews did not even try to make it to Palestine, during the early days of the war, deeming it futile. What do you think about that limit put on Jewish immigration by the British, to win Arab approval, at a time of maximum peril for Europe’s Jews? Do you think the British were wrong?

Do you still believe, as you wrote in your 1982 dissertation, that there was “collusion” between the Nazis and the Zionists? Could you explain, in greater detail, what you meant by that? Do you mean anything more than that at one point, by the Havaara Agreement in 1933, a group of German Zionists helped rescue Jews by facilitating the sale of their German properties, and helping bring them, and their now-liquid assets, to Palestine, assets with which, it was agreed with the German government, they would then buy German exports? A Jewish boycott of German goods elsewhere was also called off. Other than that most limited agreement by only one German Zionist group, at the very beginning of the Nazi period, to save 60,000 Jews, in an agreement that was more extortion than “collusion,” the Nazis

and the Zionists never collaborated.

Are you aware, President Abbas, of the role played by Hajj Amin el Husseini, who was the Mufti of Jerusalem and the leader of the "Palestinian" Arabs in the 1930s and 1940s, who met with Hitler and encouraged the "Final Solution"? Did you know that Haj Amin el Husseini helped raise a Waffen-SS Division composed entirely of Bosnian Muslims? Should "Palestinian" Arabs learn about this history?

What do you think of the manifesto written by a former editor of Charlie Hebdo, Philippe Val, and recently signed by 300 French intellectuals, writers, philosophers, as well as a former President, three former Prime Ministers, a former mayor of Paris, and many others of note, including five imams, who claim that there are numerous antisemitic verses in the Qur'an, that should somehow be rendered "obsolete" or "frozen" – that is, no longer regarded as valid? Some Muslims have responded with fury, claiming this is only "bigotry." Would this be something you could support?

In answering the last question, you denied that there are some passages in the Qur'an that certainly might be considered antisemitic. What then, do you have to say about the twenty-six Qur'anic verses just below, that are cited by sura and ayat, along with helpful summaries of their antisemitic contents?

The Qur'an depicts the Jews as inveterately evil and bent on destroying the wellbeing of the Muslims. They are the strongest of all people in enmity toward the Muslims (5:82); as fabricating things and falsely ascribing them to Allah (2:79; 3:75, 3:181); claiming that Allah's power is limited (5:64); loving to listen to lies (5:41); disobeying Allah and never observing his commands (5:13); disputing and quarreling (2:247); hiding the truth and misleading people (3:78); staging rebellion against the prophets and rejecting their guidance (2:55); being hypocritical (2:14, 2:44); giving

preference to their own interests over the teachings of Muhammad (2:87); wishing evil for people and trying to mislead them (2:109); feeling pain when others are happy or fortunate (3:120); being arrogant about their being Allah's beloved people (5:18); devouring people's wealth by subterfuge (4:161); slandering the true religion and being cursed by Allah (4:46); killing the prophets (2:61); being merciless and heartless (2:74); never keeping their promises or fulfilling their words (2:100); being unrestrained in committing sins (5:79); being cowardly (59:13-14); being miserly (4:53); being transformed into apes and pigs for breaking the Sabbath (2:63-65; 5:59-60; 7:166); and more.

You don't deny, do you, the validity of these verses? Or stories, of a similar vein, in the hadith? What, if anything, do you think should or could be done about these verses? Do you accept that "freezing" them, as the signers of the recent French manifesto declared, would be a good idea? Or does such an idea horrify you, as an example of Western "bigotry" towards Islam?

You appear to be suggesting that these verses apply only to a particular time and place, not to Jews today? But what then do you make of the Qur'anic commentators who appear to believe that if anything, the true meaning of these verses is harsher toward the Jews? Robert Spencer has given examples of these commentators, including the most important one, Ibn Kathir, on the subject of the Jews:

The classic Qur'anic commentators do not mitigate the Qur'an's words against Jews, but only add fuel to the fire. Ibn Kathir explained Qur'an 2:61 ("They were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of Allah") this way: "This Ayah [verse] indicates that the Children of Israel were plagued with humiliation, and that this will continue, meaning that it will never cease. They will continue to suffer humiliation at the hands of all who

interact with them, along with the disgrace that they feel inwardly.” Another Middle Ages commentator of lingering influence, Abdallah ibn Umar al-Baidawi, explains the same verse this way: “The Jews are mostly humiliated and wretched either of their own accord, or out of coercion of the fear of having their jizya [punitive tax] doubled.”

Ibn Kathir notes Islamic traditions that predict that at the end of the world, “the Jews will support the Dajjal (False Messiah), and the Muslims, along with ‘Isa [Jesus], son of Mary, will kill the Jews.” The idea in Islam that the end times will be marked by Muslims killing Jews comes from the prophet Muhammad himself, who said, “The Hour will not be established until you fight with the Jews, and the stone behind which a Jew will be hiding will say. ‘O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, so kill him.’” This is, not unexpectedly, a favorite motif among contemporary jihadists.

Not just contemporary jihadists, but modern-day mainstream Islamic authorities take these passages seriously. The former Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, who was the most respected cleric in the world among Sunni Muslims, called Jews “the enemies of Allah, descendants of apes and pigs.” The late Saudi sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Sudayyis, imam of the principal mosque in the holiest city in Islam, Mecca, said in a sermon that Jews are “the scum of the human race, the rats of the world, the violators of pacts and agreements, the murderers of the prophets, and the offspring of apes and pigs.”

Another Saudi sheikh, Ba’d bin Abdallah al-Ajameh al-Ghamidi, made the connection explicit: “The current behavior of the brothers of apes and pigs, their treachery, violation of agreements, and defiling of holy places ... is connected with the deeds of their forefathers during the early period of Islam—which proves the great similarity between all the Jews living today and the Jews who lived at the dawn of Islam.

President Abbas, what did you think of Ibn Kathir's remarks about Jews and the End Times that will be marked by Muslims killing Jews? Tell us, too, what you think of the former Grand Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi calling Jews "the descendants of apes and pigs"? He wasn't referring to Jews 1400 years ago, but to Jews today. Or what about the late Saudi imam of the main mosque in Mecca, who in a sermon called the Jews "the scum of the human race, the rats of the world, the violators of pacts and agreements, the murderers of the prophets, the offspring of apes and pigs"?

It would be fascinating to hear, President Abbas, what you think of what many of us believe – see the four paragraphs above – can most accurately be described as Islamic antisemitism.

President Abbas, in your "apology," you said you were sorry if anyone had found your speech "offensive," that it had not been your intent to offend anyone. But you never said you were wrong in your analysis of the reasons for hostility toward the Jews in Europe – that it was their fault, a reflection of their unacceptable behavior, "in their social function which relates to usury [unscrupulous money-lending] and banking and such." Do you think you were wrong?

With his revealing Ramallah speech and subsequent hollow "apology," Mahmoud Abbas has provided the opening needed by islamocritics – a useful word that needs to be put into much wider circulation – to ask him just a few questions about antisemitism, or antisemitisms, Christian and Islamic. Those questions – a few suggestions are given above – could be sent to him in Ramallah. He could be invited to deliver his answers either in writing, or by videotaping a response, to the major Western media. The answers Mahmoud Abbas provides, or fails to provide, should prove instructive.

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