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Muslim Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism in Postwar South Africa¹

One of the fundamental goals of apartheid was the social and intellectual separation of South Africa's so-called racial groups—Africans, “Colored,” Indians, and whites. Although the first three groups, generally lumped together as “blacks,” interacted with whites in the workplace, in domestic work arrangements, and in other informal settings, they never engaged seriously in the normal social sense. Thus the Muslim community, residing mainly (although not exclusively) in the Western Cape region, was far removed from its “white” neighbors.² Rigid separation between Muslims and white South Africans, including Jews, began to erode only in the late 1980s.³ Socioeconomic boundaries continue to exist; it will take decades to erode that informal but almost hermetic veil. One major change, however, is that a public platform is now afforded to all voices and viewpoints, including those of the Muslim population. During the 1990s, an articulate (and for some, disturbing) voice of Islam began to be heard by more and more South Africans.

Shortly after its formation in 1996, a Muslim vigilante movement known as People against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) made international news when a well-known Cape Town gangster, Rashaad Staggie, was shot, doused with gasoline, and burned alive in front of hundreds of onlookers.⁴ Similar militancy was evident at a number of anti-Israel and anti-Zionist protests held in the 1990s, where “one Zionist, one bullet,” was the common refrain—echoing the well-known Pan-Africanist Congress slogan, “one settler, one bullet.” For whites in general and for Jews in particular, the sight of placard-waving Muslims, many in kaffiyahs, conjured up images of Iran, Algeria, and the West Bank and gave

1 Our thanks to Abdulkader Tayob for his thoughtful comments. Needless to say, the opinions and conclusions offered here are those of the authors alone.

2 South African Muslims, mostly Sunni, numbered 553,585 (1.4 percent of the total population) in the 1996 census. Muslims were considered part of the “Colored” population; they are the descendants of 17th-century political prisoners brought to the Cape from Indonesia—ex-slaves, 19th-century immigrants, and the offspring of black/white miscegenation. See Ebrahim Moosa, “Islam in South Africa,” in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, ed. Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (Cape Town, 1995).

3 See John Kane-Berman, *South Africa's Silent Revolution* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1990).

4 See *Cape Times*, 5 Aug. 1996.

rise to a perception that Muslim fundamentalism was on the rise. To some extent this perception was accurate, since South African Muslim militancy also reflected worldwide developments. At present, there is both greater animosity toward the Jewish State and increased antisemitism. However, it would be incorrect to assume that Muslim–Jewish cordiality characterized the past. Rather, the geography of apartheid, coupled with state repression and the relatively insular and non-confrontational character of the conservative Muslim elite,⁵ was what once enabled Jews to feel a false sense of harmony with South African Muslims.⁶

Generally ignored by the white and Jewish media, Muslims in South Africa had long expressed anti-Zionist feelings; as early as 1925, the *Muslim Outlook* had criticized “Jewish capitalists” for allegedly forcing Arab peasants off the land.⁷ Whereas the white-owned and Eurocentric media sympathized wholeheartedly with the Jewish state from its establishment in 1948, Muslims viewed the new-found state as a catastrophe⁸ and castigated Israeli military victories against Arab forces as barbaric.⁹ Sharing in the humiliation of their “brothers and sisters,” South African Muslims used “Zionism” as a term of opprobrium and perceived Israel as an aggressor state.¹⁰ Muslim expressions of frustration and anger, however, rarely entered the public (that is, white) domain.

But by the time Israeli forces occupied southern Lebanon in 1982, a new generation of Muslims had begun to challenge its more conservative elders. Inspired by new radical teachings and by the African student uprising in Soweto in 1976,

5 Muslim politics in the 1950s and 1960s revolved mainly around issues of Orthodoxy. See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1995), ch. 2.

6 The historiography of South African Jewry has, by and large, ignored Muslim–Jewish relations. Among the exceptions are Gideon Shimoni’s “South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis,” *American Jewish Year Book* 88 (1988): 3–58; which made use of interviews of prominent Muslims, conducted by Tzippi Hoffman and Alan Fischer, in idem, eds., *The Jews in South Africa: What Future?* (Johannesburg, 1988). For more recent coverage on Muslim attitudes toward Jews, see Jocelyn Hellig, *Anti-Semitism in South Africa Today* (Tel Aviv: Project for the Study of Anti-Semitism, 1996), and Milton Shain, “Antisemitism and South African Society: The Past, the Present, and the Future,” inaugural lecture, University of Cape Town, 1998.

7 *Muslim Outlook*, 18 Apr. 1925.

8 See Muhammed Haron, “The *Muslim News* (1960–1986): Expression of an Islamic Identity in South Africa,” in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Louis Brenner (London, 1993), 222.

9 See, for example, the article titled “Barbarity of the Jews,” which appeared in the *Muslim News*, 14 July 1967 (“1948 and 1967 show that despite centuries of wandering in Europe [the Jews] have not lost their barbaric tendencies which previously incurred the wrath of God”). See also *ibid.*, 28 July 1967.

10 See, for example, *Muslim News*, 28 July 1967; Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa*, 85.

and buttressed by Khomenism and the international Muslim struggle against imperialism, younger Muslims increasingly rejected the more accommodating behavior of the Muslim establishment. Historically, many of the Muslim elite had identified with the white ruling class, taking refuge in a self-defined sense of religious and cultural superiority.¹¹ Notwithstanding, “progressive” Islamic groups also existed, some of them dating back to the 1950s: in the Transvaal, there was the Young Men’s Muslim Association (1955) and the Universal Truth Movement (1958); in Natal, the Arabic Study Circle (1950) and the Islam Propagation Centre International (1957); and in the Western Cape, the Cape Muslim Youth Movement (1957) and the Claremont Muslim Youth Association (1958).¹²

In the Transvaal and Natal, the emphasis was on promoting wider understanding of Islam. In the Cape, however, Islamic groups were far more political. For instance, the *Islamic Mission*, a newsletter sponsored by the Claremont Muslim Youth Association, serialized the anti-state writings of Abdul A’la Mawdudi (1903–1979) and Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966).¹³ The fortnightly *Muslim News*, together with other Muslim publications, increasingly vilified Zionist “intrusion” and focused attention on “the tragedy of Palestine,” regularly displaying photos of Israeli soldiers attacking Arab children and eyewitness accounts of “Israeli atrocities.”¹⁴ Significantly, local Muslims were also warned about “Zionist designs.” Readers were implored to avail themselves of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and to familiarize themselves with its contents.¹⁵

Among the prominent anti-apartheid activists in the Cape was a cleric, Imam Abdullah Haron, who had a profound influence on South African Muslims.¹⁶ Yet his death in police custody in 1969 was met with silence on the part of the Muslim clergy, and this in turn left younger Muslims feeling betrayed and disillusioned.¹⁷ The search began for a “socially relevant Islam,” as epitomized in the formation

11 See Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford, 1997), 20.

12 See Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, 82–83. The Claremont Muslim Youth Association was initially part of Call of Islam, a short-lived umbrella group of Muslims who opposed the Group Areas Act. See Farid Esack, “Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice,” *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1988): 473–98.

13 See Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, ch. 3; and Desmond Charles Rice, “Islamic Fundamentalism as a Major Religiopolitical Movement and its Impact on South Africa” (M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1987), 438–52.

14 See, for example, *Muslim News*, 23 Aug. 1963, 22 May 1964, and 22 Sept. 1968.

15 *Muslim News*, 10 Apr. 1971.

16 See Rice, “Islamic Fundamentalism,” 452.

17 See Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 52. See also the interview with Abdurrashid Omar in Hoffman and Fischer, *Jews in South Africa*, 143–49.

of the Muslim Youth Movement in 1970 and the Muslim Students Association in 1974.¹⁸ A range of Islamic activities was increasingly coordinated and guided by what was understood to be an authentic modern Islamic paradigm that, while not focusing on apartheid, did not entirely ignore it.¹⁹ In calling for an “Islamic way of life,” groups such as the Muslim Youth Movement “reflected the black consciousness movement’s appeal to an authentic black identity in South Africa.”²⁰

Although substantial opposition to the new Islamism persisted, particularly among those consolidating Deobandi thought in the Transvaal and in Natal, “progressive” forces did have an impact.²¹ On occasion, the state even intervened, several times banning the publication of anti-Zionist articles in the *Muslim News*.²² Muslim militancy was particularly evident in the wake of the United Nations resolution of 1975 that equated Zionism with racism, which was hailed as a victory for the Palestine Liberation Organization and a defeat for the United States and Israel.²³ By the late 1970s, a Palestine Islamic Solidarity Committee had been established in Durban and the Muslim Youth Movement had embarked on an Islamic campaign that included study programs, camps, and manuals.²⁴ The material for these programs, much of it provided by Islamic groups abroad, targeted Zionism, secularism, capitalism, and Communism as the major threats to Islam.²⁵

Added impetus to South African Muslim militancy was provided by the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979. In its wake, the writings of Ali Shari’ati (1933–1977) and the Ayatollah Khomeini were included on Muslim Youth Movement reading lists. Although Iran was not seen as a model for South African Muslims, a group called Qibla was founded in 1980 that was patently inspired by the overthrow of the Shah. “Islamic Revolution in South Africa” became a popular slogan in Cape Town. Meanwhile, Muslim demonstrations against Israel and Zionism at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand

18 Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 33. For a detailed examination of the Muslim Youth Movement, see Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*.

19 Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, ch. 4, esp. 118–19.

20 *Ibid.*, 122.

21 *Ibid.*, ch. 4.

22 See Haron, “The *Muslim News* (1960–1986),” 222–23.

23 See, for example, *Muslim News*, 28 Nov. 1975; interview with Ibraheem Mousa in Hoffman and Fischer, *Jews in South Africa*, 171–74.

24 On the Islamic Solidarity Committee, see Haron, “The *Muslim News* (1960–1986),” 223.

25 See Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, 140.

(following the Sabra and Shatilla massacres in Lebanon in 1982) revealed the extent of anti-Zionism among younger South African Muslims.²⁶

In 1983, the ruling National Party drafted a new constitution that granted limited political representation and the right to vote to “Coloreds” and to Indians. Muslims were included in the proposed franchise (Africans—some 70 percent of the population—were not). The proposed constitution, which came up for a vote in November 1983, was opposed by a broad coalition of groups that urged a boycott. Even the conservative Muslim Judicial Council, the largest representative body of imams and sheiks in the Western Cape, refused to support the National Party’s initiative.

The nascent Muslim consensus concerning a “no-vote” on the constitution crumbled, however, with the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF), an umbrella organization that included not only non-Muslim groups but also Communists, “amoral” secularists, and Zionists.²⁷ The inclusive nature of the UDF presented a fundamental challenge to Muslims.²⁸ For a short period the Muslim Judicial Council, almost by default, affiliated itself with the UDF, as did Al Jihad, a small, self-styled Shia group. The Muslim Youth Movement, however, denounced it, while Qibla expressed opposition to its absence of revolutionary ideology. Even the *Muslim News* saw the UDF as “ideology-less” and “dangerous.” According to an article in the paper: “This is the WCC [World Council of Churches] cum Zionist and Stalinist politics which the MJC is playing at. This is not the ‘Call of Islam,’ it is the call of the Shaytaan [Satan] to take the oppressed of this country to a solution [from] Washington and Moscow.”²⁹ Affiliation with the UDF, for many, was tantamount to selling out Muslim identity.

The *ulama*, the conservative Muslim clergy, was also opposed to the UDF. As Farid Esack notes, the *ulama* had a well-established *modus vivendi* with the apartheid state, seeking

to avoid *fitnah* (disorder), to obey the political authorities, to identify with the lesser of the two evils (i.e., with apartheid rather than communism) and to hold on to the known, in this

²⁶ See *Varsity: Official Student Newspaper of the University of Cape Town* 41, no. 9 (Aug. 1982).

²⁷ The UDF was essentially an internal wing of the then-banned African National Congress, whose leaders at the time were in exile.

²⁸ See Abdulkader I. Tayob, “Muslims’ Discourse on Alliance against Apartheid,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 3, no. 2 (Sept. 1990): 31–47; and Esack, “Three Islamic Strands.”

²⁹ *Muslim News*, 13 July 1984, cited in Tayob, “Muslims’ Discourse on Alliance against Apartheid,” 38–39.

case, sexist and exclusivist clerical theology, rather than the unknown of communitarian theological reflections on the Qur'anic text.³⁰

In essence, the UDF was seen as a threat to Islam; the conservative Muslim establishment was not prepared to see Christians, Jews, and the "Other" (however defined) as partners in its political struggle. Interfaith solidarity was considered sinful, harboring the potential, in the words of Adil Bradlow, to "reduce Islam to the level of a religion in the western sense of the word."³¹

Bradlow argued that affiliation with the UDF would "prevent the presentation of Islam [to the oppressed] as the major liberating power" and would be "tantamount to an act of *shirk* [polytheism], associating others with Allah, for He Alone is 'Sovereign.'"³² As Esack explains, such opposition to interfaith solidarity was rooted in the notion that anything non-Islamic was, *ipso facto*, void of virtue, while any freedom outside the parameters of Islam was of no consequence.³³

Notwithstanding, there were other Muslims who were determined to share in the anti-apartheid struggle with others, including Christians and Jews. This is not to say that they jettisoned the religious basis of their opposition to apartheid. Instead, building on a more humanistic and inclusive tradition—including the writings of Shari'ati and Taleqami (1910–1979)—these Muslims found justification for their views within Islam. In particular, leaders of the Call of Islam (established in 1984 by a breakaway group from the Muslim Youth Movement and the Muslim Students Association) represented a specifically South African Islamic face within the UDF. Their message, spread through mass rallies, pamphleteering, and involvement in political funerals, directly challenged the Muslim establishment.³⁴ One of their leaders, Ebrahim Rasool (Western Cape secretary of the UDF) argued that the UDF would "create the conditions whereby Muslims will take their rightful place in the struggle. It does not simply take an appeal from the Qu'ran to create revolutionaries among Muslims."³⁵ More significantly, Rasool and others advocating interfaith solidarity drew upon Islamic tradition and Qur'anic texts to

30 Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 254.

31 Adil Bradlow, "United Democratic Front: An Islamic Critique" (1984), 9, cited in Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 41. See also Ebrahim Moosa, "Muslim Conservatism in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 69 (1989): 79.

32 Bradlow, cited in Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 41.

33 *Ibid.*, 41.

34 Although the Muslim Youth Movement also took an anti-apartheid stance, it did not align itself with any political movement.

35 Quoted in "Muslims Mobilize," *New Era* (Mar. 1988), cited in Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 34.

legitimize their stance. “The Qu’ran makes it clear that non-Muslims per se are not our enemy,” Rasool argued. “[Enemies] of Islam must be defined by the way in which they undermine Islamic values. Values like justice.”³⁶

In debates concerning interfaith solidarity, however, the position of the “Other,” including the Jew, proved most contentious. While it would be wrong to suggest that there was an obsession with the presence of Jews, the Zionist question did complicate attitudes. By the 1980s, “progressive” South Africans shared a powerful mood of Third World anticolonialism. Within this framework the illegitimacy of Zionism was an important component, especially given South Africa’s close technological, scientific, and military ties with the Jewish state, which dated back to the mid-1970s.³⁷

Qibla capitalized on this mindset in its opposition to the UDF. Describing the organization as Zionist-controlled and operating at the behest of the international Jewish financial conspiracy, Qibla was able to tap into a deep-rooted anger that identified Zionism as the “citadel of imperialism.” Indeed, for some observers, Jewish and Zionist manipulation was responsible for apartheid.³⁸ The Muslim press regularly wrote about international financial machinations centered on Zionism. Even local newspapers, noted Sheikh Nazeem Mohammed, president of the Muslim Judicial Council, were “controlled by the Jews.”³⁹ These conspiratorial ideas were taken further by Ibraheem Mousa, a journalist and academic, who spoke of Jews as being “in control of a large stash of economic power in South Africa.”⁴⁰ Even those Jews committed to the struggle against apartheid were never fully trusted. The majority of Jews, claimed Sheikh Mohammed, had “obviously thrown in their lot with the Afrikaners” and “identified themselves undoubtedly with the white people. There are those who are not aligned, but it has no effect on the entire Jewish community.”⁴¹ Charitable endeavors on the part of Jewish institutions during times of crisis—for instance, following the destruction of shanties in Crossroads, a black township outside Cape Town—were also viewed with skepticism.⁴²

36 Interview with Ebrahim Rasool in Hoffman and Fischer, *Jews in South Africa*.

37 In 1976, Prime Minister B. J. Vorster came to Israel on a state visit that yielded technological, scientific, and military agreements between the two countries. See James Adams, *Israel and South Africa: The Unnatural Alliance* (London, 1984), 17.

38 See interview with Ebrahim Rasool in Hoffman and Fischer, *Jews in South Africa*.

39 See interview with Nazeem Mohammed, *ibid.*

40 See interview with Ibraheem Mousa, *ibid.*

41 See interview with Nazeem Mohammed, *ibid.*

42 See interview with Ebrahim Rasool, *ibid.*

In the late 1980s, Muslims in the “Colored” areas began to take part in mass demonstrations, with the result, according to the BBC, that “the streets of Cape Town resembled those of Tehran.”⁴³ Once Prime Minister Fredrick W. de Klerk lifted the ban on illegal organizations in February 1990, marches became even more common.⁴⁴ Bosnia, Kashmir, and “Palestine” were the main topics of protest, and both the U.S. and Israeli embassies were frequent targets of picketing.

In May 1990, the Call of Islam initiated a conference that attracted Islamic organizations from throughout the country.⁴⁵ Although there were some indications that more progressive positions were being accepted, even by critics of modern Islamic thought, a powerful strain of anti-state discourse persisted at the conference. Qibla continued to reject proposals for a negotiated settlement with the South African government. Its leader, Achmat Cassiem, also called for exclusivist Islamic unity in an appeal that attracted many conservative and radical Muslims.

The clearest indication of Islamic resurgence was the ongoing conflict between Jewish and Muslim students at the Universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand. At a number of solidarity meetings for Bosnian Muslims, American and Israeli flags were burned.⁴⁶ Jews, notes Esack, “were invariably equated with blood-sucking Zionists, and Christians with imperialists.”⁴⁷ Shortly before South Africa’s first democratic elections in April 1994, Cassiem founded the Islamic Unity Convention, a movement that claimed to be a union of 200 groups, although in essence it was a “front for marginalized religious figures and a few small organizations who accept[ed] the pre-eminence of Qibla and its leader.”⁴⁸ Muslim unity was proclaimed a “cardinal article of faith,” and the community was implored to boycott the election. Although this call was ignored, the “pure Islamic solution” became increasingly attractive as a moral malaise swept post-apartheid South Africa.

A visit in May 1994 by Yasir Arafat kept the Middle East firmly in focus. Speaking in a mosque in Johannesburg, Arafat told South African Muslims that “jihad will continue.... [Y]ou have to fight and start the jihad to liberate Jerusalem, your

43 Cited in Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 486.

44 See Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 224.

45 See Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*, 182–83.

46 See Allie A. Dubb and Milton Shain, “South Africa,” in *American Jewish Year Book 94* (1994): 375.

47 Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 225.

48 Farid Esack, “Pagad and Islamic Radicalism: Taking on the State?” *Indicator SA* 13, no. 14 (Spring 1996): 9.

sacred shrine.”⁴⁹ The following year, placards reading “Kill a Jew and Kill an Israeli” and “Jewish Blood” were displayed outside the Israeli embassy in Cape Town.⁵⁰ At an international Muslim conference titled “Creating a New Civilisation of Islam,” held in Pretoria in April 1996, speakers referred to Jews as a powerful economic force and blamed Zionists for all of society’s evils. A few months later, anti-Israel and antisemitic mailings were received by the Union of Orthodox Synagogues in Cape Town. These condemned “Nazionist barbarity” and quoted the Qur’an: “Strongest among men in enmity to the believers wilt thou [Mohammed] find the Jews and the pagans.”⁵¹

It was in this context that PAGAD, a Qibla-inspired movement, emerged.⁵² Against a background of unemployment and poverty and the breakdown of law and order in the aftermath of apartheid, Muslims began to participate in marches to the homes of known drug dealers. PAGAD, however, also had a more explicit political platform, as evidenced by its flaunted ties with Hamas and Hizbollah. According to Esack, such ties were expressions of identification with the Muslim community worldwide (the ummah). It was also indicative of a powerful anti-Zionism that constantly drew parallels between the former apartheid state and Israeli oppression of Palestinians.⁵³

In January 1997, following a bombing in a mosque in Rustenburg, members of the Muslim community accused the Mossad of responsibility. A month later, Qibla led a vociferous march on the Israeli embassy, culminating in the usual Israeli flag-burning. A similar march took place in Johannesburg, organized by the Islamic Unity Convention. On the eve of Yom Kippur that year, Muslims held pro-Hamas demonstrations outside a Pretoria mosque and placed a full-page advertisement in the Pretoria News criticizing the newspaper’s “biased and one-sided version of events in the Middle East.”⁵⁴ An incident in Hebron (in which a Jewish extremist distributed posters depicting Mohammed as a pig) led to heated

49 See Milton Shain, “South Africa,” *American Jewish Year Book* 96 (1996): 357.

50 “South Africa,” *Antisemitism World Report 1996* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research and American Jewish Committee, 1996), 311.

51 “South Africa,” *Antisemitism World Report 1997* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research and American Jewish Committee, 1997), 356.

52 See Esack, “Pagad and Islamic Radicalism,” 9.

53 *Ibid.*, 10. In 1996, there were reports that Hamas delegates were planning to meet with key South African politicians. Although the report later turned out to be erroneous, further reports that Hamas had training camps in South Africa were treated seriously (though never confirmed) by the national unity government led by the African National Congress. See Milton Shain, “South Africa,” *American Jewish Year Book* 97 (1997): 419.

54 See Milton Shain, “South Africa,” *American Jewish Year Book* 98 (1998): 402.

protests in Pretoria and Cape Town. Shortly thereafter, a home that housed a Jewish book center in Cape Town was firebombed, and phone threats were made against a Jewish home for the elderly and a synagogue. Although Imam Rashied Omar, the vice president of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, issued a condemnation, the Muslim Judicial Council kept its silence.

Tension between Muslims and Jews was exacerbated by the continued stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. When the mayor of the Cape Metropolitan Council, the Reverend William Bantom, was invited to attend an international mayoral conference in Israel in May 1998, Muslim organizations (supported by the African National Congress provincial caucus) pressured him not to go. Israeli jubilee celebrations in Cape Town that month were marred by Muslim protestors, led by Qibla, who shouted “One Zionist, one bullet” and “Viva Hizbollah and Hamas.”⁵⁵ In an exchange of letters to the *Cape Times*, Sheikh Achmat Sedick, the secretary general of the Muslim Judicial Council, condemned South African participation in the jubilee; Seymour Kopelowitz, the national director of the Jewish Board of Deputies, countered that anti-Israel demonstrations were “clearly aimed at South African Jews and not towards people living many thousands of miles away in the Middle East.”⁵⁶

South Africa’s refusal to issue a visa to Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, spiritual leader of Hamas, sparked another round of protests.⁵⁷ In a telephone interview from Kuwait that was broadcast on a Cape Town Muslim radio station, Yassin denounced all Zionists as terrorists. Qibla protested against the government decision outside the gates of Parliament, and Sheikh Ebrahim Gabriels of the Muslim Judicial Council declared that Muslims “did not recognise the Israeli State which was founded illegally on Palestinian land.”⁵⁸

The radicalization of Islam in South Africa from the 1970s onwards was marked by a distinctly negative shift in Muslim attitudes toward South African Jews and by increasing public protest in line with the “normalization” of South African society in the 1990s. Such protest, it should be noted, took place in a conducive atmosphere: leaders of the African National Congress, whose links with the PLO dated back to their years in exile, continued to maintain close ties with

⁵⁵ In addition, the Islamic Students Society at the University of Cape Town staged a protest opposite the Isaac and Jesse Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research in order to mark the 50th anniversary of the *nakba* (catastrophe) that had befallen the Palestinian people in 1948. See “The Battle of Kaplan,” *Iqraa*, 29 May 1998.

⁵⁶ *Cape Times*, 5 and 11 May 1998.

⁵⁷ An invitation had been issued to Yassin by two South African government ministers, Dullah Omar and Valli Moosa, who had met with the Hamas leader in Saudi Arabia in April 1998.

⁵⁸ See *SA Jewish Report*, 22 May 1998.

the organization in the post-apartheid era and fully supported the aspirations of the Palestinian people (although recognizing as well Israel's right to exist).⁵⁹ Notwithstanding, Muslim protests had a resonance beyond mere empathy for fellow Muslims in the Middle East.

The historic relationship between Jewish and Muslim South Africans incorporated within it the potential for conflict. Certainly in the Western Cape, some of the Muslim anger against Jews was underpinned by landlord–tenant relations in the inner city; by encounters within the textile industry (where Jews were prominent as employers and Muslims as workers); and, of course, by the general anger concerning white privilege with which Jews were understandably associated. As Ebrahim Rasool noted with regard to more recent times, “the Jewish community is also by and large the business community, the owners of the big shops, the factories. More often than not, our relationship with the Jewish community is one where we are around negotiating tables with them. Our workers striking at their factories and so forth.”⁶⁰

A dialectical relationship thus operated between negative stereotyping that was rooted in historic encounters, radical teachings, and specific realities. This said, the most important factor influencing Muslim–Jewish relations in the last quarter-century is undoubtedly Zionism and the Jewish community's public and unequivocal support for Israel. Even without the historic ties between the apartheid state and Israel, tensions would have been unavoidable. Conflict, however, was ensured by the coincidence of the Pretoria–Jerusalem axis at the very time that liberation circles were framing their struggle in terms of an attack on global imperialism that was centered on the United States and Israel. By the 1980s, antisemitism—intimately linked to anti-Zionism—appeared to be deeply rooted. Taj Hargey, a Muslim academic, explained the connection in terms of an “incompetent clergy” that was unable to deal with Zionism intellectually and rationally and thus resorted to “sheer emotive” antisemitism. “So they go onto the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. They mention other scurrilous material, usually long noses, being stingy—the Shylock imagery of Jews.”⁶¹

One sees here a range of attitudes, a “cultural code,” to use Shulamit Volkov's terminology.⁶² Volkov was referring to a cluster of ideas widely shared by Germans

⁵⁹ In this regard, it is noteworthy that Yasir Arafat was applauded when he equated Zionism with racism in an address he gave before the South African parliament in August 1998.

⁶⁰ See interview with Ebrahim Rasool in Hoffman and Fischer, *Jews in South Africa*, 115.

⁶¹ See interview with Taj Hargey, *ibid.*, 155.

⁶² See Shulamit Volkov, “Antisemitism as a Cultural Code: Reflections on the History and Historiography of Antisemitism in Imperial Germany,” *Leo Baeck Year Book* 33 (1978): 25–46.

from the 1890s, including old-style nationalism, a conservative anti-emancipatory worldview, and antisemitism. In contrast, the Muslim cultural code incorporated anti-imperialism, a general rejection of Western liberalism, capitalism, and socialism, and a virulent anti-Zionism. In both the German and the South African cases, antisemitism was a shorthand label for a batch of ideas.

Given this package, it is easy to see the connections between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Classic anti-Jewish motifs are often embedded in Muslim anti-Zionist discourse and propaganda. For some Muslim critics, Zionists are diabolically evil and hatred for Israel goes beyond the bounds of normal political conflict. Consider Achmed Deedat, author of *Arabs and Israel: Conflict or Conciliation?* (1989), who runs the Islamic Propagation Centre International in Durban. This is a well-funded organization, reportedly aided by the Bin Laden family, that for decades has disseminated anti-Hindu, anti-Christian, anti-Zionist, and antisemitic leaflets to thousands of households.⁶³ With regard to Jews, the emphasis is on power, cunning, and duplicity—themes that were underscored by Bernard Lewis in his attempt to unravel the nexus between antisemitism and anti-Zionism.⁶⁴ Here, as elsewhere, it is clear that South African Muslim hostility is not confined to anti-Zionism. At one march in Cape Town, for example, Darwood Khan, a member of the African National Congress regional executive, was heard shouting, “Hitler should have killed all the Jews.”⁶⁵

The narrow line between anti-Zionism and antisemitism is also evident in Holocaust denial, which in recent years has made an appearance among the South African Muslim community. In March 1997, for instance, a program on a Qibla-oriented Muslim radio station in Cape Town suggested that the Holocaust was exaggerated and that the peace process in the Middle East was an American Zionist swindle.⁶⁶ A year later, the same radio station featured an interview with Yaqub Zaki, a British Muslim ideologue who claimed that the “million plus” Jews who died during the Second World War had succumbed to infectious disease. Zaki, spends much of his time engaged in elaborate speculation concerning Jewish conspiracies; for instance, that the Bolshevik Revolution was funded by the Jewish banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb, and Company; or that Woodrow Wilson was an adulterer whom Jews threatened to expose in order to promote

⁶³ See *The Mercury*, 26 Sept. 1998; Shain, “South Africa,” *American Jewish Year Book 97* (1997): 420; and Allie A. Dubb and Milton Shain, “South Africa,” *American Jewish Year Book 92* (1992): 413.

⁶⁴ See Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (New York, 1986), 237.

⁶⁵ See Allie E. Dubb and Milton Shain, “South Africa,” *American Jewish Year Book 95* (1995): 362.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

their nefarious goals; and that the Freemasons, controlled by Jewish financiers, were the force behind the Balfour Declaration, insisting that Communism and Zionism were opposite sides of the same coin. The ultimate insult was provided by the radio interviewer, who expressed hope that “tonight’s in-depth analysis of Zionism in Israel has cleared the opacity that there might have been with regard to what truth is and what falsity is.”⁶⁷

There can be little doubt that Muslim-Jewish relations have deteriorated in the past three decades. On the one hand, the Muslim community should not be viewed as a monolith. As noted, various intellectual discourses can be heard within the community, some of them innovative and “progressive,” with an emphasis on Islamic humanism, universalism, and interfaith cooperation. On the other hand, all Muslim groups share a hostile critique of Zionism. In some cases this hostility is separated from antisemitism; in others, Zionism and Judaism are conflated into a combination that incorporates notions of international Jewish finance and imperialism.⁶⁸ This phenomenon was noted more than a decade ago by Farid Esack. “Nothing that the Jews do will be enough for Muslims,” he explained, when asked if Jews would be accepted by the Muslim community if they renounced all recognition and support for Israel.⁶⁹

Esack’s depressing assessment still seems to hold. At one end are conservative Muslim forces, battered by the impact of democracy and liberalism, who seek an Islamic solution to their community’s problems—refusing to recognize the post-apartheid state even as they take advantage of South Africa’s newfound tolerance and freedom.⁷⁰ At the other end are the majority of Muslims who wish to accommodate Islam within the secular South African state.⁷¹ The battle lines between these two stands are evident in the PAGAD phenomenon. Beginning with marches and action against criminals, the movement then moved into the terrain of punishing “religious gangsters.” In September 1998, the home of a progressive Islamic scholar, Ibraheem Mousa, was firebombed. This sort of action,

67 Interview with Yaqub Zaki, “Prime Talk,” 8 May 1998.

68 For an analysis of this conflation beyond South Africa, see Joseph Nevo, “Zionism Versus ‘Judaism’ in Palestine Historiography,” in *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Ronald L. Nettle (Luxembourg, 1995).

69 See interview with Farid Esack in Hoffman and Fischer, *Jews in South Africa*, 128.

70 See Abdulkader I. Tayob, “Jihad against Drugs in Cape Town: A Discourse-Centered Analysis,” *Social Dynamics* 22, no. 2 (1996): 27–28.

71 See Suren Pillay, “Globalization, Identity and the Politics of Good and Evil: Re-presenting Gangsters and Pagad” (M.A. thesis, University of the Western Cape, 1998), 3.

coupled with general threats and other forms of violence, generated a groundswell of feeling against PAGAD.⁷²

The current lines of division appear to replicate those of the early 1980s: interfaith cooperation versus an “Islamic solution.” It is possible that those seeking cooperation with other faiths will gain the upper hand and rid the Muslim community of vigilantes who, in the final analysis, pose a serious threat to the very community they wish to protect. Attitudes toward the “Other” are embedded in this struggle. Should the accommodationists win, interfaith cooperation and the building of bridges between the Muslim and Jewish communities is a possibility. Jewish behavior, however, seems far less relevant in this equation. Muslim–Jewish relations in South Africa have been defined by processes largely beyond Jewish behavior or actions. Indeed, it is changes within the wider polity, both in the global and South African sense and in the specifically Muslim sense, that have in essence defined and informed Muslim attitudes and behavior.

Epilogue

Given the emergence of Holocaust denial, together with the conspiratorial cast of mind, the opening of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre in 1999 posed an obvious challenge for Jameel McWilliams, a reporter from *Muslim Views*, who was amongst a group of reporters invited to an opening press briefing. Despite an attempt to be balanced in an article on the exhibition, McWilliams suggested underlying notions of Jewish culpability while hinting at Holocaust denial. Thus he explained that he was sorry more attention had not been devoted to the Weimar period, which he believed would have provided an understanding of Hitler’s actions. “The hyper-inflation is one [reason for the collapse of the Weimar republic and Hitler’s subsequent rise to power], because rightly or wrongly, the Jews were blamed for it.” While admitting to being moved by visuals of the death camps, McWilliams nevertheless argued that these camps were the subject of controversy. “A lively ‘numbers game’ has long been in play, and the exact purposes of the camps debated,” he noted. Nonetheless, McWilliams did acknowledge that “even if these things are disputed” the camps were “terrible places.”⁷³

⁷² Between January and October 1998, there were 165 incidents of urban violence attributed to PAGAD. See *ibid.*, 99, n. 36; also see Farid Esack’s article, “Not Just the ‘Other’ but Ourselves,” *Cape Times*, 16 Sept. 1998.

⁷³ *Muslim Views* (Aug. 1999).

In a subsequent series of articles in *Muslim Views*, McWilliams made clear his real sentiments about the Holocaust. Global conspiracies, Zionist imperialism, Jewish dishonesty, and Holocaust denial all came to the fore. To be sure, McWilliams introduced “revisionist” historiography and questioned the sacred nature of the “six million” figure—a form of “Holy Writ” as he put it. For those wishing to face the “truth,” *The Myth of the Six Million* by Feygele Peltel Myendzizshetski; *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* by Arthur Butz; *The Six Million Swindle* by Austin Joseph Rapp; and *Did Six Million Really Die?* by Richard Harwood were recommended.⁷⁴ Issues of hygiene in the camps were introduced for those reflecting upon the “legendary figure of six million Jews dead in the Holocaust,” and stress was placed on non-Jewish victims of the Nazis. “Auschwitz was crowded by people who had only the most basic idea of hygiene. The result was the spread of disease, especially typhus, which is caused by lice,” wrote McWilliams. “So how many really did die?” he asked:

Probably this can never be known with certainty, but it is an interesting fact that the Yar Vashim [sic] memorial in Jerusalem lists about one and a quarter million. What happened to the other four and three quarter million? Debunkers of the Six Million Myth, who describe it as the biggest hoax since the Donation of Constantine...generally concur that approximately one million Jews died in the camps from all causes.

If six million did indeed die in the camps, the probability is high that most of them were non-Jews.

McWilliams went on to explain that the furnaces at Auschwitz were necessary to burn dead bodies to prevent the spread of disease. “We are constantly reminded of the suffering of the Jews by the media, by Hollywood, particularly Steven Spielberg. But where is the evidence that the Germans gassed six million Jews? Was there even a deliberate policy of extermination by the Nazis of European Jewry?”⁷⁵

As noted above, Holocaust denial is a form of antisemitism and intricately tied to the anti-Zionist struggle. Thus it is not surprising that McWilliams accused Zionists of creating a guilt syndrome and repeating “the ‘Six Million’ like a mantra, the chanting of which becomes more intense with the passing of time. It is now more than half a century since the camps were liberated and one would have expected voices to have been louder then rather than now. Could it have something to do with the desire and necessity to present Israel to the world as a legitimate state?”⁷⁶ In the final article in the series, McWilliams discussed the

⁷⁴ *Muslim Views* (Nov. 1999).

⁷⁵ *Muslim Views* (Jan. 2000).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

silence and skepticism of the Catholic Church with regard to the Holocaust as well as the use of the “Six Million” as a “red herring” to divert attention from Israeli “aggression” against the Palestinians. Regarding the Vatican, McWilliams suggested that the very silence of Pope Pius XII was an indication that the Holocaust never occurred. It was, he maintained, too big an operation to be conducted in secrecy and the Vatican “would have known about it and would have spoken out, but it didn’t.”

The nexus between Holocaust denial and anti-Zionism was again apparent when McWilliams claimed Zionists invariably justified “driving the Arabs out of Palestine” by reference to “the legend of the Six Million.” “But what is so special about the suffering of the European Jews?” he asked. “What about the rest of us who lived for five years under Nazi occupation? What about all the other inmates of the concentration camps who died in them, possibly outnumbering Jews by far? What about the three million plus who died in occupied Europe? One could go on and on and yet we are constantly bombarded by the media with reminders of Six Million.” In an attempt to consolidate his thesis, McWilliams noted that the “disgusting treatment which has been meted out to the Palestinian Arabs would cause an international outcry if indulged in by anyone other than the Zionists. But how often do we hear about Deir Yassin, Sabra and Shatilla, in which entire Arab villages were massacred?”⁷⁷

Muslim anger and conspiratorial thinking in South Africa reached a new apogee just before and during the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances (WCAR) in Durban in August 2001. Aided by what was palpably huge international support, the occasion turned into “an extension of the Arab-Israeli conflict,” and an opportunity “to insert wording into draft resolutions portraying Israel and Zionism as racist and minimizing Jewish suffering and anti-Semitism.” South Africa was a tempting context in which to equate Zionism with racism, especially given apartheid South Africa’s ties with the Jewish State.⁷⁸

Prior to the conference Cape Town witnessed a 15,000-strong Muslim march in Cape Town that brought the city to a halt. The group marched to parliament to protest against what they termed atrocities committed against the Palestinians by Israel. The march was clearly part of a build up to the UN conference and included banners proclaiming Zionism as Racism and Sharon as a war criminal. Hamas was praised in the united struggle against Zionism. Sheik Achmat Sedick, secretary general of the MJC, appealed to the South African government to restore

⁷⁷ *Muslim Views* (Feb. 2000).

⁷⁸ *South African Jewish Report*, 13 July 2001.

the “Zionism is Racism” resolution to the agenda of the WCAR and called for South Africans to “take immediate action against Israel by breaking off all diplomatic and trade relations”⁷⁹

It became obvious as the conference approached that it would be, in the words of the *SA Jewish Report* editorial, “A Jamboree of Hypocrisy.” Rather than dealing constructively with “the international scourge of racism” the gathering would be “a jamboree of resentment, hatred and narrow politics”, noted the Jewish weekly.⁸⁰ Shortly before the Conference the Jewish Board of Deputies lodged a strongly-worded complaint with the South African Non-Governmental Organization Coalition, the official coordinating body of South African NGOs, after several of its representatives visited the Palestinian territories in early July on a “fact finding mission” as guests of a pro-Palestinian group. The group declined to meet with Israeli officials and afterwards publicly attacked Israel, despite not having the right to make political statements on behalf of all South African NGOs.

Predictably the NGO Forum of the Conference lambasted Israel in an ugly display of venom and anti-Zionism. According to Lara Grawitz, the South African Union of Jewish Students Zionist Officer, “neutral” delegations were influenced by the Palestinian media campaign at the youth summit. Attempts to present a positive view of Zionism were drowned out by Palestinian conference-goers who pushed the equation of Zionism with Racism and Israel as an apartheid state. The Jewish case was rapidly sidelined.⁸¹

Although the conference was an international event, local Muslim groups threw in their lot with the anti-Zionist feeding frenzy. This was “anti-Semitism in the guise of anti-Zionism,” exclaimed Marlene Bethlehem, national president of the Jewish Board of Deputies, when commenting on the conference. Various other Jewish spokespersons condemned the charade. Judge Dennis Davis noted that the conference omitted the question of Israel’s security and instead replaced South Africa with Israel as an apartheid society. “The onslaught on Israel and the Jewish people is an absolute scandal and it is racism and anti-Semitism of the worst kind,” explained Mervyn Smith, former national president of the Jewish Board of Deputies. “It is a mobilization of sentiment that knows no emotional or hypocritical barriers.”⁸²

The irony of a conference meant to combat racism and prejudice turning into a “hate-fest” was not lost on the *SA Jewish Report*. The result, it noted laconically,

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ *South African Jewish Report*, 3 Aug. 2001.

⁸¹ *South African Jewish Report*, 14 Sept. 2001.

⁸² *South African Jewish Report*, 31 Aug. 2001.

“has been to demonstrate how alive and potent one of the most ancient forms of racism—anti-Semitism—is, in that it can be spread by formal international bodies like the UN.”⁸³ “Radical Islam is on the march, and Israel has been identified as the ‘little Satan’ and lumped together with America, the ‘big Satan.’ Both are seen as enemies to be destroyed at all costs in a holy war,” noted the *SA Jewish Report* three weeks later.⁸⁴ The sale of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* at the conference, distributed through the Muslim-run Ahlul Bait Foundation of South Africa, confirmed this judgment.

Given the cast of mind evident at Durban, it is not surprising that, following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon, conspiratorial ideas were taken further by Muslim commentators. After the initial perfunctory condemnation of the attacks, *Muslim Views* declared with the use of familiar rhetoric that the occasion was a “defining moment for Muslims.” The United States was criticized for its “Islamophobic” reaction and accusatory claims were made against media coverage in the wake of the event. The “almost immediate naming of Bin Laden as chief suspect and Islamophobic reactions around the world,” was condemned and the United States was accused of polarizing the international community. Third World and Islamic countries were considered potential targets of United States retaliation. This would, explained *Muslim Views*, exacerbate conflict in the Middle East. While offering sympathy to the victims and their families, the MYM and MJC warned against “hasty conclusions, especially after the discovery of the true perpetrator of the Oklahoma bombing.” The Media Review Network, an Islamic group, merely expressed concern that “Muslim terrorists” would be unfairly blamed.

As the analysis continued, Muslims criticized television coverage for being dominated by CNN and local talk shows were accused of “displaying a fair level of ignorance and prejudice of Islam and Muslims.” No mention was made of the numbers killed in the attacks, although readers of *Muslim Views* were provided with a report from the Council on American-Islamic Relations stating that there had been three hundred attacks on Muslims in America and that the FBI had harassed American Muslims in a mosque. In short, the emphasis of Muslim comment was not on the horrific nature of the attack but rather on the repercussions for Muslims. Thus attacks on Muslims and racial profiling on airlines were the focus of comment; the FBI’s implication of 19 suspects with Middle Eastern names was questioned. According to *Muslim Views*, Western hysteria masked any realization of the “real reason that America was attacked” and stopped any

83 7 September 2001.

84 *South African Jewish Report*, 28 Sept. 2001.

serious need to reflect on what the “US government is doing in the world.”⁸⁵ Invariably Zionist connections were identified. Ibn Al Fikr captured that nexus in a letter to *Muslim Views* which reminded readers that “the pilots who hijacked the planes are war criminals no less than Ariel Sharon. The main difference is they are dead and Sharon is still running amok in occupied Palestine. He continues to murder innocent civilians just as they did.”⁸⁶

Sharon has, of course, been in a coma for the past seven years, but the nexus between Holocaust denial, anti-Zionism, and antisemitism remains evident. In the wake of the Danish cartoon fiasco, a huge Muslim protest march took place in Cape Town. Although incendiary anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist speeches were reportedly nipped in the bud, there were displays of posters denying the Holocaust. “The biggest myths: Israel, the Holocaust, Freedom, Democracy” was inscribed on one poster, neatly capturing the Islamist worldview. What this had to do with a protest against cartoons bearing Muhammad’s name evidently perplexed a reporter for a major Afrikaans-language daily. In an article, “Is it once again okay not to like the Jews?,” he noted that one person in the crowd explained that such placards were in order because Jews should not be allowed to make cartoons of Muslims. The Danes and the Jews, he continued, were all in the same boat.⁸⁷

85 *Muslim Views* (Sept. 2001).

86 *Ibid.*

87 *Die Berger*, 18 Feb. 2006.

