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A defaced poster on Israel's Star of David symbol shows Egypt's presidential candidate Ahmed Shafiq looking like late Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan in Cairo's landmark Tahrir Square on June 23, 2012. (MARWAN NAAMANI/AFP/GettyImages)

## The Sources of Egyptian Anti-Semitism

*Samuel Tadros*

“Sisi is Jewish and Egypt is now under Zionist occupation.” Thus screamed a [September 21, 2013](#) headline on Rassd, the news outlet created and backed by the Muslim Brotherhood. The story beneath the headline uses as its source the anti-Semitic conspiracy website Veterans Today, which is based in the U.S., lending it credibility in the eyes of Egyptian readers. The article explains that General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt’s Minister of Defense and de facto ruler is “Jewish by nationality” as his mother is a Moroccan Jew by the name of Malika Titani. Sisi’s maternal uncle is named Youri

Sabbagh and is described as an important Zionist who served in Ben Gurion's party. The story's information has been quoted thousands of times to the extent that if you Google Sisi's name in Arabic the first search option comes up as "Sisi Jewish."

Two months earlier, as Egypt's interim President Adly Mansour was being sworn in, Ikhwanonline.com, the official website of the Muslim Brotherhood, [published an article](#) that proclaimed him Jewish. As proof for its claim, the article, which has since been taken down, states that Mansour is a Seventh Day Adventist, which of course as all Egyptian conspiracy experts know is a Jewish sect.

Not to be outdone, anti-Muslim Brotherhood forces in Egypt have proven themselves just as adept in creating elaborate anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Brotherhood, in both its past and present forms. According to a [columnist](#) in Egypt's leading independent newspaper, Al Masry Al Youm, President Obama secretly gave the Muslim Brotherhood \$8 billion in exchange for the Brotherhood's giving 40 percent of Sinai to Hamas in an elaborate scheme whereby Hamas would take over Sinai and Israel would re-assert control over the Gaza Strip. The United States was allegedly so shocked by President Morsi's ouster that Congress is currently impeaching President Obama for squandering so much U.S. money: That "fact" was repeated in hundreds of articles in Egyptian newspapers and on Egyptian television. The former deputy head of Egypt's Intelligence Service further [confirmed on live television](#) that in fact President Obama had given the Brotherhood not \$8 billion but \$25 billion. That amount included \$10 billion in exchange for giving Israel southern Sinai. The Brotherhood, the former intelligence officer explained, was part of U.S.-hatched plots to divide the region. Those plots of course were designed by none other than Middle East historian Bernard Lewis, as [attested by Egypt's governmental newspaper Al Ahram](#).

Egyptian theories regarding the Brotherhood of old are no less imaginative. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan El Banna, is a Jew. Both his parents are Moroccan Jews, and he was implanted by Zionists in Egypt in order to form the Muslim Brotherhood, as [another government newspaper claims](#). As proof the newspaper offers

numerous facts such as Banna's being born in Behira governate, where most Jews lived; his being a Sufi and most Jews being Sufis; and his father's profession of watch repair, which craft traditionally was exclusively Jewish. Nine months earlier, a former military general **explained** to Al Ahram that Banna is indeed Jewish and that establishing the Brotherhood was part of a Jewish conspiracy to create disorder among Muslims and divide Egypt so that Jews can occupy it.

That anti-Semitism and its accompanying conspiracy theories are deeply embedded in Egyptian Islamist discourse is no surprise for those familiar with Egypt or Islamism, though familiarity does not lessen one's astonishment at the bizarre and convoluted nature of the claims made in these and other stories. Perhaps more startling to outside observers is the prevalence of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories among Egypt's non-Islamists, including its **self-described liberals** and even its **Christian minority**. Anti-Semitism is not only a dominant discourse in the country, but is rather the only common worldview shared throughout its political spectrum and among all levels of Egypt's political class.

Given its widespread appeal and the fact that it elicits little disapproval among Egypt's intellectuals and politicians, let alone its ordinary citizens, observers are not entirely at fault in assuming deep historical roots for the phenomena. Such assumptions, however, are misguided. Not so long ago, Egyptian intellectuals and politicians were not only, not anti-Semites; many of them were philo-Semites and even exhibited pro Zionist sentiments. In the 1920s it was not uncommon for a leading Egyptian intellectual to proclaim **"the victory of the Zionist ideal is also the victory of my ideal."**

How has Egypt reached such a universal consensus on the existence of a Jewish conspiracy, with the only disagreement being on the question of who are its pawns? Why is Egyptian culture so drenched in anti-Semitism? And what are the ramifications of such an all-pervading belief on the country's foreign relations and its future trajectory? To begin to answer those questions, one has to start by identifying the forms that anti-Semitism takes in Egypt and its foundations.

## FORMS OF ANTI-SEMITISM

The starting point of the anti-Semitic worldview in Egypt, as elsewhere, is the **evil nature of the Jews**. Whereas the fact of that evil is a given, its wellspring is a matter of dispute. For those more exposed to European anti-Semitic literature, the source of Jewish evil is racial. The more broadly accepted narrative traces the evil to the Jewish faith. The Jewish people as a collective (and for the anti-Semite, there is no room for individuality for a Jew) has been the premier source of evil for time immemorial. Such evil is often proved through the construction of historical narratives of Jewish evil and betrayal throughout time. Tales of the conflict between Islam's Prophet and Jewish tribes during the founding period of Islam are thus a favorite subject for Islamists, especially when combined with anecdotes of Jews as murders of prophets and rejecters of God's message.

Given this evil nature, Jews naturally seek to harm others, according to this belief. Who these "others" are is a matter of debate. For some the other is Islam itself, which Jews view as their natural enemy; for others it is the Arab nation; for Egyptian nationalists it is Egypt that the Jews aim to destroy; for still others it is simply Jewish hatred of mankind in general. Jewish ill will is revealed in various forms. Sometimes anti-Semites invoke European themes, such as the poisoning of wells or **blood libel accusations**. The Damascus Affair continues to be one of the most frequently **believed** and used **examples** in that regard. Fabrications from the Talmud are also common. Some of these themes are given **more modern forms**, with the blood libel being replaced by Jews stealing body parts, or with well-poisoning being replaced by Israel planting Egypt's lands with carcinogenic pesticides to kill its people.

Jewish hatred towards Egypt and its people is also manifested to the anti-Semite in newer forms. Jews naturally seek to undermine Egypt on all fronts. Hence the discovery of HIV cases is naturally proof of a Jewish attempt to destroy Egypt's youth, a theme to which many Egyptian movies have been dedicated. For those who lament the continuous decline in public observance of morals and traditions and their replacement

by Western pop culture, the only logical explanation is a Jewish conspiracy to corrupt Egypt's youth. On the whole the Jewish hand is seen in every misfortune that befalls Egypt—and there have been plenty of misfortunes. Jews are secretly fomenting sectarian hatreds between Egypt's Christians and Muslims. Jews are attempting to undermine Egypt's unity and desire to divide Egypt. Jews are seeking to prevent Egypt's progress and prosperity. The list is endless, and both serves as a general framework and an explanation to resort to whenever anything bad happens in the country, whether [shark attacks in Sinai](#) or the [Two Saints Church bombing](#) on New Year's Eve.

But an evil nature is not in itself enough to explain the role attributed to Jews in causing such devastation. The missing ingredient is the Jewish quest for world domination. This Jewish domination is manifested everywhere, from control of financial institutions to command of the media to domination of the United States. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is not only widely available in Egypt; more importantly it is widely believed, and its authenticity is unquestioned. The miniseries *Horseman Without a Horse*, which is based on the Protocols, is [regularly aired](#) on Egyptian television channels. The themes of the Protocols served as the major source for an [hour-long lecture](#) given to the entire high command of the Egyptian army and attended by General Sisi in April 2013. Also in attendance as the army's special guest was Mohamed Sobhy, the leading actor of the miniseries. Even former President Hosni Mubarak alluded to the Protocols as he warned Egyptians of calls for decentralization, which he [decried](#) as an endeavor to divide Egypt.

The Jewish conspiracy and the Jew's evil nature are not only manifested in events related to Egypt but also in international events. The global financial crisis of 2007–08 was thus naturally part of a [Jewish conspiracy](#). The terror attacks of 9/11 are often employed by anti-Semitic conspiracy theories who maintain that Israel had a hand in the attacks. As proof they offer the lie that 4,000 Jews were absent from the Twin Towers that day. Even those who do not publicly assert that Israel was involved in the attacks often question the official story. Across Egypt's political spectrum, politicians and intellectuals still deny [Bin Laden's responsibility for the attacks](#). 9/11 Truthers include among their ranks not only former President Mohamed Morsi but also [former President Hosni](#)

**Mubarak**, who refused to believe that young, untrained Arabs could have carried it off, and who believed that there was a conspiracy to use the attacks to allow **U.S. intervention in the region**.

The Holocaust continues to be at the center of the anti-Semitic worldview in Egypt. In explaining the continued Arab predicament in dealing with the Holocaust, **Mikael Tossavainen** writes:

The Western view on the event is unacceptable in the Arab world, since the Jews are impossible to cast in the role of innocent victims.... Such a victim role for the Jews would go against years of intense anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic propaganda in Arab public discourse, propaganda that even increased in intensity in the years following the Holocaust.

Simply put, a Jew cannot be a victim if he is, as the anti-Semites hold, the embodiment of evil. Moreover, given that most Egyptians believe that European guilt after the Holocaust is the reason for the creation of the State of Israel, denying the Holocaust is denying the legitimacy of that state.

Outside observers are often perplexed at the contradictory reactions and narratives that Egyptians and Arabs in general hold towards the Holocaust. On the one hand, Holocaust denial is widespread. From **Islamists** to **self-proclaimed liberals** the message is the same: The Holocaust either never took place or is enormously exaggerated. Simultaneously, Israel is accused of abusing the Holocaust memory by using it for propaganda purposes in order to legitimize its existence. Movies such as Schindler's List are viewed as part of such propaganda efforts and are thus banned. On the other hand, Hitler remains a very popular figure in Egypt, with people often quoting his anti-Semitic statements and **celebrating his actions against Jews**. Furthermore Israel is often compared to Nazi Germany and accused of conducting a Holocaust in Palestine. On top of all that is the often-announced threat to Jews of a new Holocaust at the hands of Muslims.

## **THE SOURCE AND HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM**

In searching for the roots of anti-Semitism in Egypt and the larger Arab and Muslim worlds, observers often point to one of two main sources: either Islam or Israel. For those holding the first view, Islam is an anti-Semitic religion full of stories and narratives that highlight the evil nature of Jews and the historical fights between the Prophet and Jewish tribes in Islam's early years. According to that explanation, modern anti-Semitism is merely a continuation of traditional religious Jew hatred.

There is no doubt that anti-Semites in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world make significant use of Quranic verses and Hadiths attributed to the Prophet Mohamed in their anti-Semitic polemics, but tracing anti-Semitism to the Quran suffers from significant historical fallacies. [As Martin Kramer points out](#), Islamic tradition does not have the Christian concept of the eternal Jew. Furthermore, under the rule of Islam, while Jews were hardly treated as equals, they were not subjected to the same level of hatred and persecution as their counterparts were in Europe. One reason for such treatment, as Bernard Lewis points out in [one of his books](#), has been the fact that in Medieval Islam Jews were not viewed as a colossal threat or competitor; this role was reserved for the competing religion and civilization that threatened the Muslim world militarily: Christianity. It is also important to note that tracing anti-Semitism to Islam offers no explanation for widespread anti-Semitism among both non-Muslims in Egypt and non-Islamist Muslims. So while [“today's Muslim anti-Semites make very effective use of the Quran and Tradition of the Prophet”](#), such use only helps strengthen an already adopted narrative. The source of modern anti-Semitism must be sought elsewhere.

The alternative explanation which the Left largely adheres to is that anti-Semitism in the Arab world is merely the result of the establishment of the State of Israel and the ongoing Arab Israeli conflict. In its most benign form, this notion suggests that Arabs are simply confused. They are in reality anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist and simply cannot distinguish between Jews and Israel. A solution to the plight of the Palestinian people would thus result in an end to anti-Semitism. As a [BBC article](#) put it: “That means that if

and when real peace comes, the Egyptian media are likely to quickly forget their anti-Semitic line.” In its malicious form, it holds Israel and Jews responsible for the growth of anti-Semitism in the region.

This explanation is no less questionable than the one that traces the emergence of anti-Semitism to Islam. While the establishment of the State of Israel and the continued Arab-Israel conflict does indeed provide numerous tools for anti-Semites, they are not the source of anti-Semitism, because they fail to explain why anti-Semitism has increased rather than decreased after the peace process between Israel and its neighbors. Moreover they fail to explain the existence of philo-Semitism among Egypt’s political and intellectual classes even after the emergence of the Zionist movement, let alone pro Zionist sentiments in the 1920s. Egyptian intellectuals at the time saw no contradiction between Egyptian nationalism and Zionism; in fact they saw significant room for cooperation. Jews were viewed not as an alien body implanted in the region but as naturally belonging to it. In fact the reverse explanation may hold more truth; many Egyptians are not anti-Semites because they are anti-Israeli; they are anti-Israeli because they became anti-Semitic first.

While those two explanations dominate the way anti-Semitism is explained, a third explanation deserves a few comments. Some observers hold Arab regimes responsible for the widespread appeal of anti-Semitism among their populations. Arab regimes, so the narrative holds, fomented anti-Semitism as a means of diverting people’s anger at their miserable conditions. Instead of blaming their rulers, Arab populations blame the Jews and their conspiracies against Arabs. There is some truth to this explanation. Arab rulers did in fact foment anti-Semitism (as I will explore further), but they did so for an ideology. And anti-Semitism in the Arab world is indeed an ideology, not just a form of bigotry; to be adopted by the masses it must be widely appealing. Furthermore, if Arab regimes from Nasser onward are to be blamed for the widespread adherence to anti-Semitism, what explains the appeal of anti-Semitism before Nasser? Surely the Egyptian state before 1952 could not be accused of actively spreading anti-Semitism. Then where did Nasser and his like-minded anti-Semites come from?

To understand the roots of anti-Semitism in the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular, we must look much deeper. We must explore both the crisis of modernity in the Arab world and the importation of European ideologies and ideas.

The crisis of modernity in the Arab world began with the sudden realization of the West's advancement and the miserable state of Arabs and Muslims by comparison. Isolated for centuries from developments in Europe, Egyptians—first their rulers and intellectuals but later on the general population as well—were shocked to discover that the Frenchmen led by Napoleon who had landed on their shores were not the same Franks they had defeated during the Crusades. The shock of the discovery of Western technological, material, and military superiority shattered the existing political order and demanded a response. The initial approach of simply importing and copying Western technology proved inadequate, as the gap between Egypt and the West grew wider. Occupation by European powers only aggravated the crisis. The crisis revolved around two questions: What went wrong, as Bernard Lewis accurately framed it; and how can we catch up.

For a while, copying the West in practice and appearance carried the day. This was the triumphant moment for modernization, liberalism, and Westernization in Egypt. Ahmed Lutfi El Sayed formulated an Egyptian nationalism, and the struggle for independence from Britain united the nation. But cracks started to appear. Egypt never managed to catch up to the West; the West, represented in Britain, proved unwilling to uphold democratic and liberal values in Egypt; and most importantly modernization was tearing society apart with little to show for it. The introduction of mass education, industrialization, and urbanization was breaking up traditional society, while modern society had not yet been created. Thousands were coming to the cities in search of a better future only to be shocked by the lack of opportunities available to them. This was the generation of Nasser, a generation described in Egyptian historiography as “the new Effendis.” The last straw was Western disillusionment with the promises of liberal democracy and the rise of communist and, more importantly, fascist regimes in Europe.

Replacing the belief in liberalism was a diverse set of ideas. Some lost faith in modernity itself and attempted to return to traditional forms of identity and behavior. Others became enchanted by the totalitarian ideas emerging in Europe. Across the political spectrum people argued that liberal democracy had failed and that only the state's forceful hand, often guided by a dictator, could save Egypt from its woes and help it catch up with the rest of the world. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy became models for many. Most importantly for our question here, disappointment led to frustration. Egypt's continual failures led to resentment of the West and a search for an explanation. It was at this moment that an indisputably European ideology—anti-Semitism—began to find fertile ground. Responsibility for Egypt's failure to catch up with the West did not lie with Egyptians; it was because Jews were conspiring against us to keep us backward.

The first introduction of anti-Semitic ideas in the region had taken place earlier at the hands of Catholic missionaries in the Levant. The Dreyfus Affair served as one of the earliest episodes of the dissemination of anti-Semitism. The impact was first felt among Christians in the Levant who attended missionary schools and for whom France was the source of inspiration. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, French influence was being replaced by Nazi Germany. Jeffrey Herf's book *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* provides illuminating details of the extent of the deliberate Nazi efforts to spread their ideas among the peoples of the region, and the collaboration of Haj Amin El Hussein with Nazis has been thoroughly exposed and documented. Haj Amin El Hussein's efforts succeeded in giving anti-Semitism the Islamic flavor that it had lacked, which proved to be crucial to its ongoing appeal. Scholars have paid less attention to other Nazi collaborators among Egypt's fascist Young Egypt movement and Islamists.

The Nazi efforts had a lasting impact on Egypt. Nasser and his fellow officers belonged to those organizations and movements from the Muslim Brotherhood to Young Egypt that had collaborated with the Nazis and were greatly influenced by them during their formative years. Following the military coup in 1952, anti-Semitism moved from the state of appealing ideology to State-sponsored ideology. While some scholarly attention has been given to the role of German scientists in building the Egyptian rockets

program, less attention has been given to the role of Nazi ideologues in shaping educational and propaganda efforts in Egypt. “In 1956, Nasser hired Johann von Leers, one of the Nazi regime’s leading anti-Semitic propagandists, to assist the Egyptian Ministry of Information in fashioning its own anti-Semitic and anti Zionist campaigns” (Herf, Nazi Propaganda).

Sadat’s decision to change course and seek peace with Israel meant that the state no longer occupied the commanding heights of anti-Semitism in Egypt. The vacuum left by the state was filled by intellectuals of all stripes and colors. This did not mean, however, that the state bureaucracy and decision-makers had become less anti-Semitic; rather, they were now forced to conceal their ideology and conspiracy theories in order not to elicit a negative reaction from their patrons in the West. On occasion their anti-Semitism was exposed, as documented in incidents mentioned in this article. The nomination of Egypt’s Minister of Culture Farouk Hosny to head UNESCO was one such ugly episode.

Egypt’s modern history is the story of continued failure: failure to modernize, failure to deliver the promised salvation to the masses, failure to better their miserable conditions, and above all the failure of a country to find the place it believes it deserves under the sun. Defeats, failures, and disappointments have taken their toll on the people. Only the existence of a Jewish conspiracy against Egypt, Arabs, and Islam can offer them solace. Only by believing that the Jews are responsible for their miserable conditions can they find comfort.

Those hopeful that the Arab Spring would introduce a breath of fresh air in the region, and especially on the question of anti-Semitism, were soon mugged by reality. Instead of becoming less appealing, anti-Semitism has become the lingua franca of politics in Egypt. Faced with tremendous political, social, and economic upheaval, the Egyptian political class and the general population have found an answer in the Jewish conspiracy. Israel, Turkey, the United States, the European Union, and Qatar are all conspiring against Egypt, screams a self-proclaimed Egyptian liberal; the United States

is working against Copts for the benefit of Jews, [shouts a Coptic activist](#); the Brotherhood is implementing the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, writes the [newspaper of what was once Egypt's flagship liberal party](#); Israel aims to divide Egypt into a number of smaller and weaker states, [writes another](#); Brotherhood leaders are Masonic Jews proclaims a [Sufi leader](#); no, it's the coup that is working for the benefit of the Jews, declares [the Brotherhood's website](#). These are all symptoms of a decaying society.

## **SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?**

When confronted with anti-Semitism in their country, Egyptians typically dismiss the charge out of hand. "We cannot be anti-Semites, for we are Semites ourselves," is the favorite line. Western observers, incapable of echoing such nonsense, have tended to dismiss concern with the widespread appeal of anti-Semitism in Egypt and beyond. "It's just a stupid knee-jerk reaction to the Arab-Israeli conflict", is a [sentiment held by many](#). Egyptians are not really anti-Semites, not like the Europeans anyway; they are just anti Israeli and cannot make the differentiation between Israel and the Jews. Given that, after the persecution by Nasser, there are very few Jews in the country anyway, this bigotry has no practical ramifications and should not concern us. Egypt will uphold its peace treaty with Israel, and the country's decision-makers, while sometimes using anti-Semitism as a tool, are too sane to fall for such nonsense.

Such attitudes are not only wrong; they are dangerous. As I've shown, decision-makers in Egypt are not themselves immune to anti-Semitism but in fact are among its most committed believers. In the top ranks of the Egyptian army, in its intelligence community, and in the ranks of state servants, the nearly universal belief of the existence of a Jewish conspiracy against the homeland is dangerous and affects perception of reality and hence policy. To be unable to see the world as it is, to be incapable of understanding the causes of events, is a dangerous condition, and one that can lead to disastrous consequences.

Anti-Semitism in Egypt is not merely a form of bigotry. It forms the basis on which its

adherents interpret and understand the world. As such, at the forefront of those concerned by its widespread adaptation by the country's leaders and intellectuals should be Egyptians themselves—at least those who care enough about the country's future and wish it well. As [Walter Russell Mead has argued](#): “Rabid anti-Semitism coupled with an addiction to implausible conspiracy theories is a very strong predictor of national doom.”

Anti-Semitism is one of the pillars of socio-political life in Egypt. A country consumed with such madness cannot become a flourishing liberal democracy. Egypt should not be doomed to such a condition. Those who seek a better future for their country must begin by combating the vicious monster head on, before it consumes them.



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The American Interest

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