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Debating World without Israel

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# Debating a World Without ISRAEL

*Josef Joffe's cover story, "A World Without Israel" (January/February 2005), drew widespread attention from FP's readers and the media. In this special **FP Roundtable**, prominent thinkers from the United States, Israel, and the Arab world scrutinize the Jewish state's controversial conduct and debate whether Israel is the source of what ails the Middle East or a convenient scapegoat.*

## JOFFE'S FLIGHT OF FANTASY

*By Brian Klug*

Toward the end of his essay, Joffe raises the question of whether it is anti-Semitic to blame Israel for "Arab rage" at the United States and for all the troubles of the Middle East. His answer is ambiguous. On one hand, he says it is not anti-Semitism. On the other hand, "denying Israel's legitimacy bears an uncanny resemblance to some central features of this darkest of creeds." "Uncanny resemblance" sounds like "suspiciously familiar," implying an underlying connection. Be that as it may, Joffe thinks that Israel today "finds itself in an analogous position" to that of "the Jews" who suffered anti-Semitism. The latter were perceived as "omnipotent, ubiquitous, and thus responsible for the evils of the world." Joffe thinks that Israel is perceived the same way vis-à-vis the Middle East. But this analogy is fatally flawed.

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In the first place, if a writ of habeas corpus were served upon him, it is unclear who Joffe would produce as the analogue to the anti-Semite. Who, in other words, holds the extreme anti-Israel view that Joffe is attacking, the view that Israel is the "root cause" of whatever ails the Middle East, such that the region would be completely trouble free if Israel had never existed or if it vanished into thin air? I dare say there are people who hold this ludicrous view; but they include none, or nearly none, of those whom Joffe mentions by name; certainly not Anatol Lieven or Tony Judt. The object of his attack is a kind of identikit figure, a composite of different critics of Israel with widely divergent opinions. In short, a straw man.

Second, in one crucial respect Israel could hardly be more different than the persecuted Jew of old: the power of the one as against the impotence of the other. Anti-Semites imagined that "the Jews" controlled the world. But this notion was fantasy. In reality, such power as Jews possessed was limited, contingent, and



temporary. It certainly was not enough to prevent one disaster after another befalling their communities, nor the ultimate catastrophe of the Nazi Holocaust. Zionism saw itself precisely as a political movement to empower the powerless. On its own terms it succeeded; some would say with a vengeance. In any event, not only is Israel today a major power in the Middle East but its successive governments have prided themselves on creating “facts on the ground.” The idea that Israel, in the exercise of its power, is not a major source of conflict in the region beggars belief. Certainly, asserting the opposite does not resemble anti-Semitism in the slightest, let alone “uncannily.”

Furthermore, instead of laying all the blame for the failures and antagonisms of the Middle East “on the doorstep of the Jewish state,” Joffe places it—all of it—squarely on the shoulders of the “Arab-Islamic world.” He derides “single-cause explanations” and the simple-minded denigration of Israel. Yet he is unremittingly derogatory about the rest of the region. We hear about “the sheer venom oozing from the pages of the Arab-Islamic press,” “the political pathologies of the Middle East,” “the dysfunc-

tionality of the Arab world,” and “the civilization of clashes” that is “the hallmark of Arab political culture.” As if no interventions from the outside had ever injured the region, he speaks only of the “self-inflicted wounds of the Arab-Islamic world.” Thus, Joffe’s position is a mirror image of the one he attacks.

Underlying his argument is a certain picture. Israel, he says, was admired well into the 1970s as the “state of ‘those plucky Jews’ who ... made democracy and the desert bloom in a climate hostile to both liberty and greenery.” Nature and politics converge in this familiar Manichean narrative. It is as if the land and its Arab inhabitants were equal partners in impotence, equally devoid of virtue, equally arid; but Israel is the bringer of life. In the image with which the essay concludes, the Arab-Islamic Middle East is a dump, the “world’s most noxious neighborhood [where] the cleanup hasn’t even begun.”

This view is not Islamophobia. It is not what Edward Said meant by “Orientalism”: seeing the East as inherently irrational, backward, and degenerate. It is not anti-Arab racism. But the resemblance is uncanny. **FP**

## HEAD IN THE SAND

*By Mouin Rabbani*

**J**osef Joffe offers a counterfactual history of the Middle East to demonstrate that the Jewish state is fundamentally irrelevant to the region’s realities and that those who believe otherwise are anti-Semitic. The problem is not that Joffe relies on speculation to make his case, but that the alternative history he constructs goes so far beyond informed conjecture that he ultimately lands in the realm of fantasy.

Consider Joffe’s most innovative claim that, even if Israel never existed, Palestinians today would still be a stateless people living in exile or under occupation. The alternative scenario, that sovereignty in Palestine—as with every other British and French possession in the Middle East—would have been transferred to its indigenous inhabitants, is never entertained. Rather, Joffe asserts, Palestine would in 1948 have been cleansed of its inhabitants by its Arab neighbors because in 1990 “half the population of Kuwait fled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.” Should we also

conclude that France would have cleansed Belgium of Walloons after World War I because Germany carried out massive deportations during World War II?

Had Joffe examined the historical record before speculating against it, he would have found that the Palestinians have experienced both Arab and Israeli rule since 1948. Although both were undeniably oppressive, the record nevertheless clearly demonstrates crucial differences. In sharp contrast to what transpired in Palestine/Israel during 1947–49, for example, the West Bank and Gaza Strip did not experience wholesale expulsions while under Arab rule between 1948 and 1967. The significant reduction in population that occurred between 1967 and 1970 was a direct result of Israeli policies.

By invoking Egyptian and Jordanian territorial designs on Palestine, Joffe further claims that an Arab victory in the 1967 war would have left Palestinian fortunes unaffected. Here again, the revisionist flight of fancy can only be sustained by the excision of history. Apart from Egypt’s decision not to annex the

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Gaza Strip when it could have effortlessly done so (and Cairo's rejection of subsequent Israeli entreaties to again take possession of this territory), the only evidence we have that Jordan, like Israel, would have claimed ownership over the land without extending equal citizenship to its inhabitants is that it did the opposite between 1948 and 1967. One need not be an apologist for the Arab record on Palestine to recognize that it is not so easily separated from the conflict, and that Israel's attempts to transform fundamentally this territory have been of an entirely different order than Arab attempts to dominate it.

Deploying his rigorous methodology to the "Arab-Islamic world," Joffe finds the planet's "most dysfunctional region" to be "a civilization of clashes" replete with "pathology" and "the world's most noxious neighborhood" (where "the cleanup hasn't even begun"). How would Joffe portray a prominent Arab editor who resorted to such epithets about Israel and the "Jewish world"? Here, at least, one can speculate with certainty. All the more ironic, therefore, that Joffe constructs a handy fiction of a vast anti-Semitic conspiracy to evade, dismiss, and ultimately condemn serious examination of Israel and its policies. In doing so, he delegitimizes attendant issues that merit scrutiny, such as how Israel and U.S. support for its conduct have contributed to growing radicalization within the region and the deterioration in Arab-American relations.

To even pose such questions, in Joffe's view, "makes sense only if one cherishes single-cause

explanations." Must Israel explain either everything or nothing at all? In the real world, it would seem conceivable and even probable that the Israeli factor is, depending on the context, either paramount, significant, minor, or irrelevant. Given that

Joffe provides not a shred of evidence that the "single-cause explanation" has any currency among European or American elites, fails to cite a single reputable European newspaper or government statement in this respect, and can come no closer than citing a British writer here and a Brazilian one there, one suspects he concocted this straw man because, without it, he would have nothing to knock down. Indeed, the only reductionism in evidence is furnished by Joffe himself. Critics of Israel are either "hard-hard," "hard," "semihard," or "soft" anti-Semites, yet they are all impotent when discussing the Middle East.

If Joffe prefers to stick his head in the sand by insisting there is nothing to investigate, and that inquiry into Israel's

conduct is accordingly irrelevant and illegitimate, let him burrow. As we have learned from Iraq, the rest of us would do better to raise serious, as opposed to spurious, questions about the contemporary Middle East, and to formulate our responses on the basis of meaningful knowledge and verifiable evidence rather than fantastic speculation and vacuous generalities. There is too much at stake—both within the region and well beyond—to do otherwise. **FP**



# WHITEWASHING A CRIMINAL RECORD

By *Ilan Pappé*

**A**lternative history is always a risky business—or so we teach our students in history departments. However, it is a rewarding intellectual exercise as it reveals what the person engaged in such an endeavor thinks about certain topics; in this particular case, what Josef Joffe thinks about the right of Israel to exist and the irrelevance of the Palestinian tragedy.

In this limited space, I cannot tackle all the flawed historical assumptions Joffe makes in his article (I think his claim about the recent reversal of Israel's image is

erroneous, as the state has been criticized continuously in most parts of the world), or explain the very different natures of the various criticisms directed at Israel. (Joffe lumps together Islamic militancy, liberal critique, and Marxist analysis in a rather paranoid claim that they all are ultimate manifesta-

tions of anti-Semitism; whereas, in reality, they are based on concern for the Palestinians rather than a negation of Israel as a state).

The principle weakness of Joffe's approach is that two utterly discrete questions have been obfuscated by a very passionate defense of Israel's right to exist. One has to distinguish between what would have happened had Israel not existed and the query of the state's legitimacy in light of its problematic past.

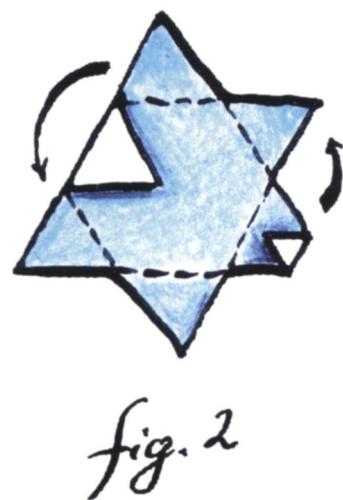
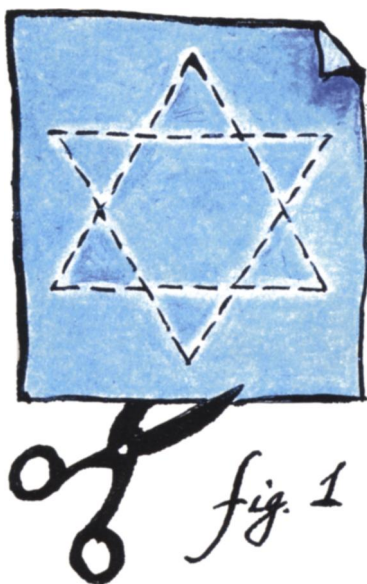
The first question should be viewed principally from the perspective of Israel's victims, the Palestinians. Had Israel not existed, then 750,000 Palestinians would not have become refugees. Five hundred Palestinian

villages, 11 Palestinian towns, 94 percent of the cultivated land in Palestine, thousands of Palestinian businesses, and endless numbers of careers would have been saved. Under whatever political structure that would have evolved instead of Israel in Mandatory Palestine, the catastrophe that befell the Palestinian people in 1948—when they were ethnically cleansed by the Jewish state—would not have occurred.

Had Israel not existed, the lives of 50,000 Palestinians—my estimate of the number killed by Israel in its 57 years of existence—would have been spared. Two and a half million Palestinians would have been saved from one of the cruelest and most callous military occupations in the second half of the 20th century. A million Palestinian citizens in Israel would have been exempted from an apartheid system that has discriminated against them ever since the creation of the state. And, above all, the millions of Palestinian refugees could have come back home.

Moreover, Arab regimes could not have hidden behind the Palestine question as an excuse for neglecting their social and economic agendas; nor could they have excused authoritarianism and a lack of democracy by the need to rally—as pan-Arabism dictates—around the cause of Palestine.

Had Israel not existed, the United States could have opened new avenues in its relationship with the Arab and Muslim worlds. True, the United States has its own agenda that is often in direct confrontation with these societies, but it needs urgently to engage in a dialogue based on mutual respect. This dialogue fails to emerge because Israel regards such a shift as an existential threat. Many people have already died because an under-



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standing did not materialize, and many more will die if the current U.S. and Israeli agenda in the Middle East continues to fuse into a uniform anti-Arab and anti-Islamic strategy.

Much of the harm done by Israel cannot be repaired. But there is hope for the future based on

a restitutive logic: repatriation of refugees, the end of Israeli occupation, and the creation of a unitary, secular democratic state over historical Palestine. Any other plan or development would lead to the further destruction of the Palestinians and the devolution of Israel into a pariah state. **FP**

## AN ALTERNATE ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

By Juan Cole

In his assessment of what a world without Israel would look like, Joffe makes numerous unfounded assumptions and puts them forward without any qualifications. But if someone were to run his historical thought experiment from an opposing point of view, all his arguments could be easily contradicted.

Let us say that Israel was sited in German territory rather than in the Middle East, as reparation for the Holocaust after World War II. Let us then begin, as Joffe does, in 1948. He asserts that Egypt, Jordan, and Syria came to Palestine not to save the Palestinians, but to grab territory. In reality, though, the plight of the Palestinians at the hands of Zionist colonialists afforded the rationale for the invasion and made it palatable to Arab publics. And Britain, which was a powerful enough force in world affairs to guarantee Kuwait's independence from Iraq in 1961, would have similarly protected Jordan and Palestine from the predations of Syria. In short, the 1948 war never would have occurred.

Without that war, Palestine would have developed as Lebanon did, as a small, mercantile, Levantine state. Moreover, a great deal of subsequent destabilization in the region would have been avoided, as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians never would have been expelled to neighboring countries. If the Palestinians had not fled to Jordan in 1948, there would have been no civil war in that country from 1970 to 1971. Palestine and Jordan would have been friendly neighbors, jointly exploiting the international pilgrimage trade to the Holy Land. A Jordan that prospered from tourism would have been far less likely to

produce radical anti-Western figures, such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

If the Palestinians had not been expelled to Lebanon in 1948, there would have been no Lebanese civil war of 1975–89. The civil war in Jordan radicalized the Palestinians, and the refugee camps in Lebanon became incubators for the guerrilla movement that emerged in the late 1960s to fight Israel. When Israel began bombing Lebanon in retaliation for guerrilla attacks, right-wing Christian Maronites in Lebanon favored repressive measures against the virtual Palestinian state within their borders—thereby fueling the sectarian tensions that erupted into full-scale civil war. Lebanon without a civil war would have continued its 1960s development trajectory as the Switzerland of the Middle East. Beirut would have become a world hub of finance, through which all proceeds from Gulf petroleum states would have steadily flowed.

Moreover, the 1948 conflict radicalized young Egyptian officers who were outraged that their government—led by the liberal, albeit corrupt Wafd Party—had sent them to war with shoddy weaponry and equipment. These festering resentments contributed

to their coup plot, carried out in 1952 by Gamal Abdel Nasser and his cadre of “Free Officers.” Without a 1948 war, Egypt might well have developed as a parliamentary democracy, avoiding the decades of military rule that followed 1952.

A liberal, parliamentary Egypt would have harnessed the private-sector energies of Egypt's Jews, Armenians, and Greeks, who owned most of the strong factories, rather than chasing them away as the nationalist military government under Nasser did. Without the



fig. 3

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1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982 wars, Egypt would have attracted enormous international investment, perhaps replicating the economic miracles that occurred in South Korea and Japan. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood would not have been able to churn out propaganda about the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians and would have slipped into decline as Egyptians became prosperous and integrated into the Western economies. A liberal Egypt would have been a staunch ally of Washington during the Cold War and after.

A liberal Egypt and Lebanon would have served as models for the rest of the region. Authoritarian governance would be much less prevalent, as would have the grievances and radicalism to which it has given rise. Parliamentary government, a vibrant private sector, and Western tourism and investment, would have shaped the region in a manner closer to what happened in Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand, as opposed to the dreary, militarized societies that emerged. In such a world, an organization like al

Qaeda could have gained no purchase at all in the Mediterranean Middle East. And it would have had no reason at all to strike at the United States.

Joffe makes many Orientalist assumptions about the nature of Arab societies. He assumes that Lebanon's sectarian divides would necessarily have produced a civil war, when it was the Palestinian issue that actually formed its crux. He assumes that Egypt was doomed to militarism, when the confrontation with Israel drove the society in that direction. Similar essentialist arguments could have been made at one time about Korea and Japan. Societies do not have essences, and most Middle East politics responds to real crises and the effects of real policies. As Joffe says, there are many conflicts and problems in the Middle East that have nothing to do with Israel. Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, however, and the policies toward Israel of its Arab neighbors, have certainly formed a drag on the social and economic development of the frontline states, and on Israel itself. **FP**

## A STATE OF DENIAL

By Anatol Lieven

**I**n his essay, Joffe takes the most extreme positions he can find, and then uses them to try to smear moderate positions with which he disagrees. He transforms every suggestion that Israeli policies have played a part in increasing Arab and Muslim chauvinism into a belief that the Middle East would "have a happy career... once Israel vanishes." In his view, any serious criticism of Israel represents an attempt to "delegitimize" the state of Israel or somehow deny Israel's right to exist.

Because he has made me one of his targets, let me make my actual position completely clear. Neither in my latest book (*America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*) nor anywhere else have I ever suggested that Israel or Israeli policies are a "root cause" either of Muslim hatred of the West or of the numerous pathologies of the Middle East.

On the contrary, I have always stated clearly that these roots predate Israel's creation by many hundreds of years. They lie in the long history of conflict between the Muslim and Christian worlds, in the deep decline of most of the Muslim world in recent

centuries, and in the ways in which that decline was exploited by Western imperial powers.

What every opinion survey of the Middle East attests—including those of the U.S. State Department—is that the Israeli occupation, and the daily TV images of Palestinian suffering, have played a powerful role in focusing and intensifying the wider resentments of ordinary Arabs and directing them against the United States, as well as Israel. The shift in international opinion regarding Israel from the 1970s onward, which Joffe bizarrely places in a historical vacuum, stemmed above all from Israel's decision to become an occupying and colonizing power.

To deny this fact—and to suggest that public opinion in the Arab and Muslim worlds would remain the same without the occupation and without such images—is to fly in the face not only of evidence but of reason. Joffe might at least do well to listen to al Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri, who has written that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the ideal means of mobilizing Arabs for jihad, because "it is a rallying point for all Arabs, whether or not they are believers."

To return to my own position, I have never questioned Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state

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within the borders of 1967. Moreover, I acknowledge Israel's full right, under the Geneva Conventions, to continue a military occupation of the Palestinian territories pending the creation of an effective Palestinian Authority prepared to reach a reasonable settlement.

What I oppose is Israel's illegal settlement policy, and the United States' acquiescence to that policy. As even many Israeli liberals argue, their government's conduct of continually whittling away at the remaining Palestinian lands will make an eventual peace

much more difficult. This policy is also posing a serious threat both to Israeli democracy and Israel's demographic security.

In a single token sentence at the very end of his essay, Joffe appears to agree, speaking of the "pernicious" effects of the occupation on Israel itself. If he really believes this, then it is his clear duty to speak out publicly against the present terms of the occupation, and to call for U.S. pressure that they be changed. Why he chooses not to do so is something I leave to his own conscience. **FP**

## A BOLD EXPERIMENT

By Fouad Ajami

**T**he East, it is entirely foreign to me... Mine is a Westerner's mentality!" Vladimir Jabotinsky, the intellectual godfather of Revisionist Zionism, once proudly and categorically proclaimed. He was, by our

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contemporary language and sensibility, "politically incorrect," but there can be no doubting the historical correctness of his assertion. Israel is in the Middle East, but not of it. Therein lies the power and jolting "incorrectness" of Josef Joffe's essay. For some time, I have had a fantasy: A scientist would go into a laboratory and would successfully isolate all the disturbances (the variances, shall we say) that Israel



causes in its Middle Eastern and Muslim neighborhood. The scientist would be wily and would disregard the noise and the false evidence that had led other investigators to Israel's doorstep. He or she would take the Muslim and Arab worlds as they really are. My scientist would show a certain kind of "respect" for the truth of Arab-Muslim history—its power, its malignancies, its fight for order and coherence, its age-old struggle between the ruler and the ruled, the orthodox and the schismatics, the country and the city, those swept up by modernity and those intensely violated by it. In the reading of the evidence, my scientist, I am certain, would find some minor disturbance caused by the presence on the fringe of that life of a Zionist political and cultural enterprise by the name of Israel. But the larger truths and maladies would be Arab and Muslim through and through.

Finally, we have this scientific reading. It is vintage Joffe to write boldly and brilliantly, and this essay is one of his boldest yet. There is in Joffe a genuine appreciation of "the East." I can testify to that, having talked with him often about Middle Eastern matters. (I went with him to Iraq during a truly violent week in October of 2003.) This article is the perfect illustration of his recognition that those Arab tides ebb and flow around Israel. With or without Israel, he tells us, there would rage a great battle over the presence of the West under the skin of today's Arabs. With or without Israel, he reminds us, there would step forth fundamentalist, ultra-Wahhabite preachers convinced that the secularists around them, in Arabia and neighboring lands, are apostates who have given themselves over to ungodly ways. And yes, Joffe is correct, had the Zionist project been aborted in the 1930s and 1940s,

the Alawites of Syria would have still risen out of insularity and fear in their mountains to subdue the proud cities in the Syrian plains. What exactly does Israel have to do with the slaughter in Algeria between Islamists and secular men and women that the Islamists disdainfully label as *hizb Fransa*, the "party of France"? Does anyone truly believe that the anti-Shia bigotry of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi would scatter to the wind if the Zionists folded up their national project?

True enough, the Arab intellectual class is prone to assign Israel a large place in its autopsy of what ails them. But this exercise is pretense, done for Western audiences, newspapers, and satellite television talk, as the Arabs would say. All Joffe has done is simply speak the kind of truths Arabs do when Westerners are not around, away from the judgments, and expectations, of outsiders.

A war took place in 1948: The Zionists prevailed and the Palestinians lost, yet the Palestinians found their way to Arab courts and leftist movements alike. In the years to come, they were to take part in the writing of a historiography totally at odds with the wellsprings of Arab life. It was convenient history. The rulers on the scene liked it, as it edited out the way the ruling classes ruled, the autocracy and the plunder of it all. And Western intellectuals took to it, because it was so familiar, and, well, so Western. Now Joffe dares challenge this orthodoxy. The storm of criticism he provoked has nothing to do with the truth of his arguments. The controversy is but a statement about the stubborn willfulness of political ideas, their ability to stand there, hollowed out, as the outside world batters them and goes about its own way. **FP**

## THE PERILS OF SCAPEGOATING

By Josef Joffe

Some of these critics make a valid point: Counterfactual history is silly history, which is precisely why we teach students in History 101 to stay away from it. But heuristically, "what-if" exercises jog the mind and the imagination. They are mental gymnastics, not proof. But why attack my what-if device, as Ilan Pappé does, by engaging in counterfactuals himself? He is castigating me for smoking while lighting up some strong stuff. And so I won-

der where he unearthed the number of 50,000 Palestinians killed by the Israelis. The state of Israel didn't even manage to kill that many combatants in its five wars with Arab nations when it unleashed the full panoply of its military might upon them.

Altogether, these critics resort to name-calling and ad hominem, with which it is impossible to deal except by responding in kind. (However, I choose not to do so, as we have all outgrown the sandbox.) Such epithets as "Islamophobia" (Brian Klug) raise a more grievous issue, which suffus-

*Josef Joffe is the publisher of Die Zeit.*

es so much of the postmodern debate. It substitutes fighting words for arguments and thus seeks to disqualify rather than to engage interlocutors. Let's have more David Hume and John Locke, and less Jacques Derrida and Edward Said. I am glad to hear that the anti-Semitic fantasy positing that the Jews control the world is but a fantasy. Nonetheless, I would like to steer Klug to the Website of the Middle East Media Research Institute, which diligently translates the Arab press. What he can read there about Jews in sickening profusion will make even the most hardened anti-Semite sob with envy.

I would respectfully offer the same advice to Mouin Rabbani and add, no, my argument does not hinge on a "handy fiction of a vast anti-Semitic conspiracy." But I do follow the Arab media, and a "fiction," alas, Arab-Islamic anti-Semitism is not.

I am also heartened to hear from Juan Cole that, in the absence of Israel, Jordan and Palestine would have been "friendly neighbors." Like Iran and Iraq? Like Iraq and Kuwait? Or Egypt and Libya? Also, I do not make "assumptions" about the "nature of Arab societies." Instead, I quote lavishly

from two reports published by the U.N. Development Programme. Are the Arab authors of these reports also "Orientalists" who disparage Middle Eastern cultures? Sadly, Cole makes my very point in denying it, claiming that everything would have been hunky-dory in the absence of a Jewish state.

As to Lieven, I am grateful that he agrees with my main point that neither Israel nor its policies are the "root cause" of "Muslim hatred of the West or of the numerous pathologies of the Middle East." But why the ad hominem at the very end? I have questioned only his previous interjections, not his conscience.

Let me finally assure my critics that I would not have written this article if all the world adored the Israelis and bad-mouthed the Arabs. Indeed, I might have issued the opposite plea. But the truth is that Israel has become an almost universal target of denigration and denunciation, and so it was high time to argue against a mounting tide of clichés that threatens good sense and sober analysis, not to speak of the moral failure that attends such one-sided apportionment of blame. Criticism of Israel is good. Scapegoating is thoughtless at best and heinous at worst. **FP**

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