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ANTISEMITISM IN THE ARAB WORLD: A BRIEF OVERVIEW (2023)

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UNMASKING ANTISEMITIC BACKLASH: CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL NORMALIZATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

The announcement of the Abraham Accords in August 2020 stirred dormant conspiracy theories in the Arab world, with one particularly prevalent and deeply antisemitic narrative suggesting a Jewish-Zionist-American conspiracy to establish a new religion called "al-Ibrahimiyya." This alleged plot aimed at undermining Islam and was widely disseminated through manifestos, fatwas, articles, books, and conferences, finding expression among clerics, academics, and commentators from Cairo to London. Some versions of this conspiracy were rooted in fabricated pamphlets and selective interpretations of the Quran, portraying Jews as satanic demons and earthly representatives of evil.

The genesis of this conspiracy theory was linked to the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) decision to create the "Abrahamic Family House" in Abu Dhabi, unveiled during the 2019 "Year of Tolerance." This complex, intended to encompass a mosque, a church, and a synagogue, symbolized the UAE's commitment to a discourse on tolerance. The Abraham Accords, reflecting the Emirati "discourse on tolerance," were explicitly framed as the cornerstone for fostering interfaith and intercultural relations. Notably, they marked an unprecedented acknowledgment of Judaism as both a religion and a nation, recognizing Jews as indigenous to the Middle East. The accord asserted that the Arab and Jewish peoples share a common ancestor in Abraham, emphasizing his role as an inspiration for promoting coexistence among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East.

Emirati clerics, led by Sheikh 'Abdullah bin Bayyah, the Mauritanian director of the UAE Fatwa Council, justified the peace with Israel by highlighting shared human values championed by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The accords, therefore, aimed to transcend historical hostilities and promote a vision of peaceful coexistence rooted in common heritage and shared values.

Opponents of the Abraham Accords vehemently rejected the narrative promoting brotherly ties between Jews and Muslims. Exiled Emirati opposition activists, aligned with the Al-Islah Association, the Muslim Brothers' branch in the UAE (banned in 2014), vehemently contended that placing trust in Jews, whom they referred to as "the murderers of the prophets," was unwarranted. They argued that making peace with people whose history, according to them, is founded on aggression against all nations should be avoided.

Emirati opposition activists, particularly those associated with the Emirati Resistance Union against Normalization, such as Ahmad al-Shayba al-Nu'aymi residing in London, accused "Zionism, its sponsors, and its collaborators" of a scheme to establish a new religion called Ibrahimiyya. Al-Nu'aymi, in an article titled "Distorting the religion in order to achieve normalization with the Zionists," warned of a plot to weaken Islam, portraying it as a fortified wall against schemes to normalize, commit treachery, and eliminate the Palestinian problem.

A manifesto endorsed by thirty-two Islamic organizations in February 2021 asserted that following the tenets of the so-called "Ibrahimi religion" amounted to a repudiation of Islam. The manifesto contended that historical Jewish contempt for Muslims, dating back to the time of Muhammad, persists and will endure. It claimed that contemporary expressions of this contempt include modern Jews attempting to take over the Arab world through initiatives ostensibly retracing Abraham's life journey and plotting to return to their native Arab homelands as a potential fifth column.

In a rare convergence, both Islamist organizations associated with the Muslim Brothers and al-Azhar, the influential Islamic university, expressed fear of the so-called "Ibrahimi religion." In 2021, Ahmad al-Tayyib, Sheikh al-Azhar, cautioned against the call for the Ibrahimi faith. While not explicitly linking it to the Abraham Accords, this cautionary statement was seen as a moment of shared concern, even as al-Tayyib aimed to maintain diplomatic ties with the Emirati regime.

Al-Tayyib expressed concerns that preaching a united Ibrahimi religion might result in the creation of a "colorless, flavorless, and odorless new religion," potentially harming religious pluralism. In Egypt, observers interpreted his words as reflecting reservations about the normalization with Israel. This sentiment was echoed by various Egyptians who actively propagated the notion that the Ibrahimi idea constituted a Jewish-Zionist plot. Disguised under academic veneer, their lectures, writings, and interviews were infused with explicit antisemitic motifs.

Dr. Hiba Jamal al-Din, a social sciences lecturer at the Institute of National Planning and a member of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA), emerged as a prominent Egyptian figure disseminating the claim of a Jewish conspiracy. In the aftermath of the Abraham Accords, she authored two books purportedly unveiling "the greatest imperialist plot of the 21st century." Al-Din's books aimed to substantiate the assertion that American scholars' efforts to highlight commonalities among monotheistic faiths constituted a form of "spiritual diplomacy." According to her, this diplomacy sought to marginalize the Palestinian problem, negate the demand for Palestinian rights, and whitewash the Zionist occupation.

Jamal al-Din made various other claims to support her perspective on what she perceived as an imperialist plot. These included allegations of an effort to create a new Ibrahimi Middle East, establish a regional entity termed "the United Ibrahimi States," and transform Arab-Islamic identity into a so-called "Ibrahimi" identity. These narratives, steeped in conspiratorial thinking, aimed to delegitimize efforts at fostering understanding and collaboration among monotheistic faiths, particularly in the context of the Abraham Accords.

Several claims made by Dr. Hiba Jamal al-Din contained antisemitic undertones. In an interview with Egyptian media following the announcement of the Abraham Accords, she likened Israel to "a viper that changes its shape and color and wishes to devour the region as a whole, using diverse means, some of which we know of, and most of which we can't even imagine." This metaphorical characterization perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Jews and reinforces a conspiratorial view of Israel's actions in the region.

Another Egyptian scholar, Mursi al-Adham, authored a venomously antisemitic conspiracy book titled "The Ibrahimi-Jewish Plots: Destroying the Monotheistic Religions and Subjugating Humanity." In this book, Jews are portrayed as devils, with the author claiming that the Jewish religion commands its adherents to destroy humanity, enslave and debase gentile nations, steal Arab lands, commit heinous crimes, and engage in acts of extreme brutality. Al-Adham relies on the discredited and antisemitic "Franklin Document," a Nazi forgery from 1935, to support his claims.

Despite the problematic nature of these conspiracy theories, some segments of the Egyptian media, including the widely read daily al-Masri al-Yawm, received al-Adham's book positively. It even garnered enough support for a book launch at the Cairo International Book Fair in 2021, hosted by Dar al-Ma'arif, a prestigious publishing house. This reception underscores the concerning tolerance for antisemitic narratives within certain circles.

However, not all voices in the Arab world endorsed these conspiracy theories. Some, like Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam, the secretary-general of the UAE-based Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, spoke out against the notion of a global conspiracy to create a new religion. He emphasized that the purpose

of the "Abrahamic Family House" in Abu Dhabi was to highlight the unique aspects of each religion rather than promote a homogenized global faith. These dissenting voices underscore the diversity of opinions within the Arab world regarding the Abraham Accords and associated conspiracy theories.

'Abd al-Qadir al-Zawi, a former Moroccan ambassador to the UAE, took issue with the International Union of Muslim Scholars, accusing it of disseminating fake news with the aim of undermining states that normalized their ties with Israel. He emphasized the importance of distinguishing between Judaism as a monotheistic religion and the State of Israel as a UN-recognized political entity, asserting that the Abraham Accords were signed with the latter.

Egyptian commentator Jamal Abu al-Hasan criticized Sheikh al-Azhar's comments on the alleged Ibrahimi faith, dismissing it as a fabricated notion with no evidence of anyone actively discussing or promoting it. He questioned the legitimacy of claims surrounding this purported faith.

While critical discussions about peace accords are a legitimate part of political discourse, the injection of conspiracy theories with antisemitic undertones is dangerous. Such narratives can fuel hatred and exacerbate tensions. The call for champions of peace and truth to combat these toxic ideas resonates in both Israel and the Arab world, emphasizing the importance of fostering understanding and countering harmful conspiracy narratives.

HOUTH ESCALATION: UNVEILING THE SURGE OF ANTISEMITIC RHETORIC IN YEMEN

In 2022, Ansar Allah, commonly known as the Houthis, escalated their antisemitic campaign, revealing a deep-seated presence of anti-Jewish propaganda in certain segments of the Muslim world, even beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This surge in rhetoric, fueled by the Iranian-backed movement from northern Yemen, associated with the Zaydi school of Shi'a Islam (Zaydiyya), underscores the persistence of these sentiments.

The Zaydiyya movement traces its roots to Zayd ibn 'Ali, whom they recognize as the fifth imam, differentiating them as Fiver Shi'as from the Twelver Shi'as who follow Zayd's brother, Muhammad al-Baqir, as the fifth imam. Apart from the succession dispute, substantial theological variances exist between Zaydi Shi'ism and Twelver Shi'ism. Zaydis place emphasis on rationalism over textual literalism, reject the infallibility of the imams, advocate for the obligation to overthrow an unjust ruler, disavow the doctrine of the twelfth hidden imam's messianic return, and resist subordination to a clerical hierarchy.

The roots of the Houthi movement can be traced back to the early 1990s, emerging as a manifestation of Zaydi activism and revivalism in response to the neglect of Zaydi areas by the government in San'a' after the unification of northern and southern Yemen in May 1990. The movement's foundation reflects historical grievances and a desire for recognition within the broader political landscape.

In matters of ideology, the Houthis have largely adhered to traditional Zaydiyya positions on various issues. Nevertheless, they have introduced certain innovations, influenced in part by the official ideology of the Islamic Republic, such as the notion of the supreme leader's infallibility. This ideological reshaping was notably influenced by the late leader of the movement, Hussein al-Houthi, during his study period in Iran.

Among the innovations introduced by the Houthis are staunch positions of anti-imperialism and antisemitism. Their official slogan, adopted immediately after the American invasion of Iraq and currently pervasive in northern Yemen, includes expressions like "God is great," "death to the US," "death to Israel," "curse the Jews," and "victory for Islam." The group has been consistently committed to antisemitism since the early 2000s, with an alarming escalation in 2022.

In January 2022, Houthi Health Minister Taha al-Mutawakkil, in a sermon broadcast on Houthi-owned al-Iman TV, referred to the Jews' leader as Satan and accused Jews throughout history of spreading moral decay. Al-Mutawakkil also propagated the belief that Jews, through their "deceptive nature," control global decision-making centers. This conspiracy theory, asserting Jewish control over political and financial power globally, is prevalent in other Houthi leaders' videos. A July 2022 release by Houthi-affiliated al-Masirah TV, based in Beirut under the auspices of Hezbollah, suggested that an Israeli company used special bracelets to spy on Muslim pilgrims in Mecca.

On al-Quds Day, the Houthi supreme leader, 'Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, asserted in a video that the "Israeli Zionist entity" oversees a "Zionist lobby in the world," labeling it as the "enemy of Islam and Muslims." In light of such inflammatory statements, it is unsurprising that the Houthis enacted legislation in the previous year prohibiting normalization with Israel and criminalizing any form of contact with the Jewish state or its citizens.

'Abd al-Malik expressed strong opposition to normalization in a speech, condemning ties with "the Zionist entity" as "a betrayal of Allah, His Messenger, and [the] Muslims." He urged Western countries to liberate themselves from Jewish Zionism, which he claimed has "taken control of them, misled them, corrupted them." In June 2022, 'Abd al-Malik asserted in a video that during the time of Prophet Muhammad, the Jewish neighborhoods in Medina were considered the filthiest places. The video emphasized that the Prophet presented Jews as an example of filth, emphasizing cleanliness as a virtue.

This theme reappeared in an April interview on al-Masirah TV with a Houthi-affiliated scholar who proclaimed, based on the Quran, that Jews are the "filthiest and most evil human beings" transformed into apes and pigs by Allah. The scholar invoked Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, accused Jews of spreading diseases like AIDS and cancer, and blamed them for immorality. In March 2022, Muhammad 'Ali al-Houthi, a member of the Supreme Political Council, propagated an antisemitic conspiracy theory, linking the war in Ukraine to Jewish influence, claiming that Ukraine was drawn into war because of its Jewish president.

Throughout the year, the Houthi leadership celebrated acts of violence against Jews, and threats were directed toward Israeli Jews. In a September 2022 music video aired on al-Masirah TV, featuring a Houthi military parade, captions in Arabic and Hebrew warned the Zionists of disgrace and predicted the end of Israel. The video threatened Jerusalem with cleansing from what it referred to as the "filth of the Jews," adding ominous references to the might of the Houthi forces and the sharpness of their swords.

The Houthis have amplified their antisemitic agenda in 2022 for several interconnected reasons. Firstly, amid a military stalemate where Iranian material support holds heightened significance, overt hostility towards Jews serves as a means for the Houthis to underscore their allegiance to the "axis of resistance" led by Tehran—an alliance rooted in antisemitism as one of its ideological foundations.

Secondly, the group strategically deploys antisemitism to differentiate itself from Gulf monarchies that have established diplomatic ties with Israel. By doing so, the Houthis aim to garner sympathy, support, and legitimacy among the predominantly pro-Palestinian Muslim and Arab public.

Thirdly, against a backdrop of fuel shortages, food insecurity, and steep inflation impacting the lives of people in northern Yemen, the Houthis resort to antisemitism as a diversionary tactic. By shifting focus towards a common enemy, they seek to redirect public frustration away from their governance failures.

The intensified antisemitic rhetoric poses a security threat to the few remaining Yemeni Jews, primarily elderly individuals. Although Yemen's Jewish community has largely relocated due to unbearable conditions and offers from Israel, a small number, seven according to a UN Panel of Experts on Yemen report, still reside in Yemen. The security threats faced by this minority, such as the documented case of a Jew detained for transferring an ancient Torah scroll to Israel, are a cause for genuine concern.

Moreover, the indoctrination of Yemeni youth in Houthi summer camps and classrooms, where antisemitic slogans are repeated daily, presents a disturbing trend. Houthi-approved textbooks further propagate antisemitic sentiments, encouraging a distorted view that frames America and Israel as enemies and promotes a skewed interpretation of jihad, blaming Jews for global control and depicting them as a threat to Islam. This indoctrination not only fosters a toxic environment but also raises broader concerns about the impact on the region's future stability and inter-community relations.

The pervasive exposure of Yemeni youth to antisemitic propaganda raises concerns about the enduring impact on their perspectives and attitudes. Without timely and effective intervention, the risk of long-term survival of antisemitic thinking remains, persisting even in the event of a potential Houthi military defeat.

Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond the immediate geopolitical context. Educational reforms and initiatives promoting tolerance, diversity, and critical thinking are essential to counteract the influence of antisemitic indoctrination. Furthermore, international organizations, NGOs, and diplomatic efforts should collaborate to provide resources and support for educational programs that foster understanding, respect, and open-mindedness among Yemeni youth.

Efforts to counter antisemitism should also be integrated into broader strategies for post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. Rebuilding a society requires not only physical infrastructure but also a commitment to dismantling harmful ideologies that fuel hatred and division.

In addition to external support, local leaders, religious figures, and community influencers play a pivotal role in challenging and changing ingrained attitudes. Promoting interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding can contribute to the creation of a more tolerant and inclusive society.

It is crucial to recognize that combating antisemitism is not only about countering an immediate threat but also about fostering a culture of acceptance and respect that can endure beyond the current geopolitical dynamics. By addressing the roots of antisemitic thinking and promoting a culture of tolerance, there is hope for mitigating its long-term impact on Yemeni youth.

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