

# Israel, America & Arab Delusions

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**By Daniel Pipes**

In Mid-January, as the first bombs began to fall on Iraq, Saddam Hussein and his partisans continued to offer two strikingly contrary interpretations of their war with the U.S.-led alliance. Sometimes—especially when justifying their own gratuitous missile attacks on Israel—the Iraqis have presented the entire conflict as a great conspiracy hatched by Zionists and executed by their American stooge. “This war that is being waged against us is a Zionist war,” said Saddam Hussein in a television interview at the end of January, “only here, Zionism is fighting us through American blood.” But when Baghdad has wanted to paint President Bush as the “arch-Satan” in the White House, Israel has then shriveled into America’s “evil cat’s-paw.” Obviously, only one of these characterizations of Israel can be true: either it steers Washington’s Middle East policy or it serves American imperial interests—but not both.

Similar contradictions have been put forward since the beginning of the Persian Gulf crisis. Thus, on June 24, 1990, just over a month before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a Baghdad newspaper complained that the U.S. government merely echoed decisions made in Israel, that it lacked an “independent policy” on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Then, just four days later, on June 28, another Baghdad daily proposed exactly the opposite thesis, proclaiming that the U.S. had for decades “used the Zionist entity as a tool to safeguard its interests in the region.”

The Iraqis are not alone in espousing these contradictory positions. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the charismatic Egyptian leader, used to declare that, if not for British help, the idea of a Zionist state would have remained a “madman’s fantasy.” At the same time he subscribed to an extreme form of Jewish-conspiracy theory: “Three hundred Zionists, each of whom knows all the others, govern the fate of the European continent.” His successor, Anwar al-Sadat, likewise could describe Israel as Washington’s “gendarme” in the Middle East while on other occasions maintaining that American policy puts “Israel’s interests before those of the United States herself.”

The Syrian government of Hafez al-Assad also contradicts itself on relations between the U.S. and Israel. When its ties to Moscow have been strong, Damascus has stressed the dangers of imperialist plots and variously derided Israel as “a U.S. base,” America’s “big stick,” and “a mere U.S. aircraft carrier.” In contrast, when Syria has sought to improve relations with Washington, it has blamed “world Jewry” for subverting American policy. “The United States does not have a policy of its own in the Middle East,” it has said, but blindly follows directives issued in Tel Aviv.

Similarly with the Palestine Liberation Organization. “The Zionist entity,” PLO chairman Yasir Arafat announced in April 1990, “represents the head of the body of hostile world forces inside the Arab nation; its role is to protect the interests of those forces.” But Hani al-Hasan, a top Arafat aide, claims that the United States “is governed by the Zionist lobby.”

Do Arabs, then, see Israel as the forward bastion of Western interests, or as the covert power behind Western decision-making? Logic requires that either Washington tells Jerusalem what to do or Jerusalem bullies

Washington. Yet many Muslims—Arabs and Iranians (though few Turks)—seem to sense no contradiction between these two cherished visions of Israel. They merrily exist side by side—even in the same individual and in the same speech—without so much as a hint of intellectual strain or inconsistency.

Middle Eastern perceptions of Israel's place in the world have profound significance for the Arab conflict with Israel, and so repay careful analysis. That they are so starkly contradictory suggests that, even after a century of the Zionist enterprise, the Muslim peoples of the region still have not settled on a way to understand it. This fact has many implications for Israel, and for the United States.

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The notion that Zionism serves as a tool of the Western powers is an old one, going back at least as far as Abdulhamit II, the Ottoman Sultan between 1876 and 1909. His was a reasonable idea: after all, St. Petersburg looked after the interests of Armenians living in his realm, Paris sponsored the Maronites, and London was allied with the Druse, so why not assume that the Jews, or the Zionists, were sponsored too? The trouble was that this assumption happened not to be true.

Nevertheless, the idea persisted: during the Mandatory period (1918-47), endorsement by the British of a Jewish national home in Palestine was interpreted by Muslims primarily as a way for London to protect the Suez Canal and the route to India. With India's independence in 1947, the emphasis shifted to the maintenance of British commerce in the Middle East. According to Egypt's Muslim Brethren, the British assembled "thousands of vagabonds and aliens, bloodsuckers and pimps, and said to them, 'Take for yourselves a national home called Israel.'" Later, when the U.S. government replaced Britain as chief culprit, Washington was retroactively held responsible for the establishment of Israel. Muammar al-Qaddafi of Libya has flatly asserted that "the United States created Israel," supplying it with the weapons and intelligence Israelis need to kill Arabs.

Why did the British and American imperialists want Israel to exist? Arabs have a rich assortment of answers to this question. *Ash-Sha'b*, a leftist Egyptian newspaper, portrays Israel as a branch office of the Central Intelligence Agency, one which requires CIA "approval and support" before taking almost any step. Ahmad Jibril (leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command) dubs Israel "America's Mideast aircraft carrier." Khalid al-Hasan, another PLO leader, sees Israel as "something like a conglomerate—General Motors, for example."

And what functions does this intelligence office/aircraft carrier/multinational corporation serve? To jeopardize whatever it may be the speaker holds most dear. Thus, for Nasser, the Pan-Arab leader, Israel endangered Pan-Arab nationalism. His 1962 Charter of National Action dubbed Israel "the tool of imperialism" and "a whip in their hands to fight the struggling Arabs." In 1968 the PLO was still under Nasser's influence, so its Covenant accused Israel of being "a geographic base for world imperialism placed strategically in the midst of the Arab homeland to combat the hopes of the Arab nation for liberation, amity, and progress."

For Nasser's confidant, Mohamed Heikal, Israel's main role was to control the oil trade. He held in 1964 that "the flow of Arab oil is one of the important factors in the establishment of Israel on the soil of the Arabs." Shortly afterward, Yahya Hamuda, Arafat's predecessor as head of the PLO, portrayed Israel as "an instrument of American imperialist colonialism which seeks to appropriate our oil."

For fundamentalist Muslims, Israel is a vehicle to suppress true Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini held that Israel had “penetrated all the economic, military, and political affairs” of Iran with the intention to “annihilate Islam.” Hizbullah, the pro-Iranian Lebanese group, characterizes Israel as the “American spearhead in our Islamic world.” Hamas, the Palestinian fundamentalist group, accuses the Jews of trying to “liquidate Islam.”

Israel is also accused of serving a number of other purposes. Professor Edward Said of Columbia, one of the PLO’s unofficial spokesmen, calls Israel “a device for holding Islam—and later the Soviet Union, Communism—at bay.” Others point to Israel’s alleged part in fomenting counterrevolutionary activities and acting as a center for psychological warfare. Its very existence is seen as forcing the Arabs to invest in war rather than economic development, as diverting their attention from domestic issues, and as providing the reactionaries with the means to stay in power. In their most paranoid moments, some Arabs even worry about genocide.

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Curiously, there is also a recessive view in which Israel is regarded not as an instrument of imperialism but as its victim—a place to which a people not wanted in Christian Europe was expelled. This premise inspires some of the wildest speculations of all. Muhammad Mahdi at-Tajir, a United Arab Emirates ambassador to Great Britain, once explained to a British writer: “It is not the Jews who created the state [of Israel]. It is an invention of their enemies, especially the British. When you wanted to get rid of them because you were afraid they would rule Britain, you put the idea in their head of creating a homeland.” Qaddafi took the notion one step further, calling the creation of Israel “a big international conspiracy against the Jews.” Addressing Jews, he warned them that the Europeans “want to get rid of you and throw you in Palestine for the Arabs to eliminate you some day.” To avoid this fate, Qaddafi urged Israelis to “leave Palestine immediately and return to [your] own countries.”

To be sure, the notion of Jews as victims has never enjoyed a wide following among Muslims, possibly because it is much less useful than portraying Israel as a monstrous and all-powerful agent of imperialism. This latter view deepens hatred for the enemy, inflates the threat he poses, stimulates xenophobia, and rallies citizens. It turns Israel from a parochial Middle East concern into a global problem, universalizing the Arab cause. It also makes Arab defeat that much more palatable: how can Arabs beat an Israel enjoying British and American support?

Depending on their strategy toward Israel, Arab leaders under the sway of the imperialist myth conceive of Washington either as their principal nemesis or as the way to a solution. Those who plan militarily to destroy Israel are implacably hostile to the U.S. To Qaddafi, Washington is “the bitter enemy until doomsday”; Assad (for all that he has joined forces with Washington against Iraq) deems the U.S. “the main enemy of the Arab nation”; and Baghdad Radio’s Voice of the PLO chimes in with “the major enemy . . . both in the past and in the present.” But Arab leaders intent on dealing diplomatically with Israel draw the opposite conclusion: if Washington makes the key decisions, they had better cultivate it. Sadat and Arafat followed this course in the hope that the Americans would compel Israel to do their bidding.

Whether it casts the U.S. as enemy or ally, the imperialist theory causes Arab leaders to focus too much on the United States and too little on Israel. With the single exception of 1957 (when President Eisenhower forced the Israelis to evacuate the Sinai Peninsula), the expectation of American pressure on Israel has invariably been disappointed. Still, the illusion lives on that the Americans might again, as Arafat puts it, “do

what Eisenhower did.” Sadat thought that the Americans held “99 percent of the cards” but eventually discovered that he had to negotiate with Menachem Begin, not Jimmy Carter. Alexander Haig was considered pro-Israel; therefore, when he resigned as Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State in June 1982, the PLO was elated. One of Arafat’s aides even acknowledged, “I felt as if we had won the war that night.” But as the next few months showed, he was wholly mistaken.

Too little attention to Israel leads the Arabs into serious blunders. Nasser concentrated so intently on extruding American influence from the Middle East that he virtually ignored that effect of his actions on Israel. This partially explains how he blundered into the Six-Day War. Similarly, leaders of the *intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip designed their insurrection to win the sympathy of Western television audiences, and did not realize the damage this did to their cause among the Israeli electorate.

If Israel is merely Washington’s pawn, then obviously a cherished slogan has to be discarded—that the Jewish lobby drives American policy. Surprisingly, Arab leaders do sometimes (contradicting what they say at most other times) draw this conclusion. Deputy Prime Minister Khaddam of Syria put it clearly in 1981: “There is a deep and organic link between the United States and Israel. We are under no illusions about this. The link is not due to the ‘Zionist lobby’ in the United States but to the fact that it is the only friend of the United States in the area and because it represents a major base for protecting U.S. interests.” In a remarkable statement eight years later, Arafat echoed this outlook. The Kuwaiti News Agency paraphrased him as expressing the belief that “it’s the U.S. and not Israel that determines the American policy in the region,” and dismissing “as baseless the myth of the Zionist lobby in the United States.”

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Yet it is precisely this idea of an all-powerful “Zionist lobby” that is most commonly invoked to explain the “special relationship” between the United States and Israel, which so mystifies Arabs and Iranians. In 1980 Syria’s Khaddam articulated this puzzlement over the fact that the U.S. government seems to favor four million Jews over 150 million Arabs: “What has Israel given the United States? Obviously, nothing, neither oil nor money. The reverse is true. Israel takes everything from the United States. At a time when the Arabs provide the United States with oil, money, and political support, what is the result? U.S. aid to Israel.”

As Muslims, these Middle Easterners fail to understand the emotional resonance of a common Bible and a host of Judeo-Christian features. As Middle Easterners, they cannot see beyond the clash of nationalisms to comprehend shared interests between countries. As citizens of authoritarian states, they miss the importance of personal, cultural, and political bonds between free peoples. Perplexed by an alliance that makes no sense to them, they fall back on the theory that Americans do not use Israelis but instead are their dupes.

In a 1944 broadcast on Nazi-controlled Radio Berlin, the Palestinian leader Amin al-Husseini noted the strong support for Zionism found in the U.S. Congress. His comment: “No one ever thought that 140 million Americans would become tools in Jewish hands.” The same notion remained common in the postwar years. At the United Nations debate on the partition of Palestine, Faris al-Khuri, dean of the Arab diplomats, held that although Zionists formed only one-thirtieth of the U.S. population, “they have extended their influence into all circles.” He warned Americans to “be careful for the future which awaits them.” Writing about U.S. politics in his 1951 book, *From Here We Learn*, the Egyptian thinker Muhammad al-Ghazali asserted that “the rudder of higher politics is in the hands of the Jews.” Postwar suspicion of Jewish power was so strong, recalls Miles Copeland, the late CIA operative, that American diplomacy in the Arab world during the period

1947-52 consisted largely of trying “to convince the various Foreign Offices that our government was not under the control of the Zionists.”

Rana Kabbani is a sophisticated Syrian woman who lived in Washington and studied at Georgetown University; Salman Rushdie praised her study, *Europe’s Myths of Orient*, as “an important, fierce, and judicious book”; married to the British journalist Patrick Seale and living in London, she has been described in *Mother Jones* as having “star quality: beauty, brains, and social position.” And what did this highly intelligent woman learn during her years in proximity to the institutions of American power? That the simple prejudices bandied about in her homeland were valid. “Every Arab believes that American policy toward the Middle East is made in Tel Aviv, but to discover that this was indeed the case, and not mere paranoia, was a great shock.”

Governments repeat this charge, too. “U.S. policy toward the Arabs,” declared the Iraqi first Deputy Prime Minister, Taha Yasin Ramadan, “is drawn up by Zionist circles.” King Hussein of Jordan has publicly blamed the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the pro-Israel lobby, for wrong-headed American policies in the Middle East. Syrian radio has argued that Israeli power in Washington results from “the Zionists’ gold and dollars.” According to it, “the Zionists financed election campaigns [of Senators], gave them their racist votes, and continued to provide them with bribes to raise their hands whenever a decision desired by the Zionists needed to be made.” And as if that were not enough, the Israeli government “slips dollars into their pockets.”

Predictably, Henry Kissinger’s Jewish background was interpreted as a mechanism for Israeli control over the American body politic. As Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy of Egypt put it, Kissinger “was in fact always acting on behalf of Israel.” If ever Kissinger dared disagree with the Israeli government, it “brought him quickly into line.”

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In another, more baroque variation, some Muslims see Communism as a Jewish plot. King Faisal of Saudi Arabia (1905-75) all his adult life collapsed his two hobbyhorses, Jews and Communists, into one, and believed in a Zionist-Bolshevik conspiracy against the Arabs. Using that ugly 19th-century forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as a proof text, he alleged that “Zionism is the mother of Communism. . . . It’s all part of a great plot, a grand conspiracy. Communism . . . is a Zionist creation designed to fulfill the aims of Zionism. They are only pretending to work against each other.”

Faisal’s obsession caused him to lobby leaders whenever he could, no matter how unsettling the effect. At a White House dinner in his honor, he spent much of the time telling Richard Nixon that Bolshevism was an offspring of Zionism. Faisal came away gratified with the impact he had. “The President,” he reported to Mohamed Heikal, “had shown great interest and had asked him to repeat his remarks to Vice President Spiro Agnew and to the director of the CIA, Richard Helms, which he did. The King was obviously pleased at having, as he felt, convinced these powerful figures of a profound and neglected political truth.” (In his *Memoirs*, however, Nixon wrote only one dismissive sentence on this topic—“Faisal saw Zionist and Communist conspiracies everywhere around him.”)

Two years later, at a state dinner in his Riyadh palace for Secretary of State Kissinger, Faisal publicly harangued his captive guest for two hours, informing him that “Jews and Communists were working now in

parallel, now together, to undermine the civilized world as we knew it.” He explained that Israel was “the Middle East outpost of that plot . . . put there by Bolshevism for the principal purpose of dividing America from the Arabs.” Deeply embarrassed, Kissinger tried to change the subject by asking the King about a picture on the wall. But this gambit failed. It “threw Faisal into some minutes of deep melancholy, causing conversation around the table to stop altogether.”

Middle Eastern leaders sometimes portray Israel as a threat not merely to them but to all of humanity. Assad (who to this day shelters Adolf Eichmann’s secretary, SS captain Alois Brunner, the leading Nazi fugitive now alive) has described the Zionists as “invaders who are threatening not just the Arab nation but the entire human race.” Likewise, senior PLO figures seem sincerely to believe they are doing battle on behalf of all humanity. And the charter of the fundamentalist Palestinian group, Hamas, cites *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by name and frequently reflects the message of that fraudulent text:

The enemies . . . have labored to amass astounding and influential material wealth, which has been exploited to realize their dream. They have used their wealth to gain control of the world media, news agencies, the press, broadcasting stations, etc. . . . They were behind the French Revolution and the Communist Revolution. . . . They instigated World War I. . . . They caused World War II. . . . It was they who gave the instructions to establish the United Nations and the Security Council to replace the League of Nations, in order to rule over the world through them.

Taking this argument one step further, some Arabs argue that they must save the West from the clutches of the Zionists. Saddam Hussein once declared that Arab strength vis-à-vis Israel “not only will help liberate ourselves, but . . . will liberate others in the West from the weight of the Zionist pressure they are subjected to.”

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Three points bear noting. First, each of these two themes contains a kernel of truth. The great powers now and then have expected to benefit from Israel. As early as 1840, British Foreign Minister Lord Palmerston wrote that the return of the Jewish people to Palestine would serve to check “any future evil designs of Mehemet Ali [the ruler of Egypt] or his successor.” The Balfour Declaration did endorse a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people. The U.S. government did form a strategic partnership with Israel in the 1980’s. But all this has to be put in context. Palmerston’s ideas were stillborn; London quickly regretted the Balfour Declaration; and American support for Israel comes much less from putative imperialists (such as business interests or the military) than from those who feel moral or spiritual ties with the Jewish state.

Conversely, it is also true that Jews play an impressively large role in Western life. The great Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann had access to the highest circles of British officialdom, while AIPAC has rightly been called “perhaps the most effective pressure group in Washington.” Still, the idea of a Zionist plot rests on the faulty premise that Jews are the only Westerners favoring strong ties to Israel; in fact, of course, this bond draws on many sources—theological, moral, political, and strategic—and enjoys wide support among the Christian majority. Americans have consistently viewed good relations with Israel as an important aspect of U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, while the U.S. public is skeptical about foreign aid in principle, a review of forty years of history shows that most Americans “strongly support” economic and military aid to Israel. Conspiracy theorists tend to ignore these inconvenient details.

Second, myths about the relation between Israel and the United States are not the only myths about Israel rampant in the Muslim world: many in the Middle East are also of two minds about the relation between Israel and the USSR. While Khalid Baqdash, leader of the Syrian Communist party since 1936, holds that “world Jewry is ranged against the Soviet Union,” an Egyptian daily maintains that “only the USSR has derived benefit” from the establishment of Israel. These examples, which can be multiplied many times, suggest a state of complete confusion about Israel.

Third, neither the imperialist nor the Zionist interpretation is original to the Middle East; both come from Europe. The notion of Israel as a tool of imperialism goes back to Lenin and the early Bolshevik state. Thus, a Soviet document from July 1919 called Zionism “one of the branches of the imperialist counterrevolution,” an idea subsequently repeated *ad nauseam* by the Soviet propaganda apparatus. Leonid Brezhnev, according to Heikal, told the Egyptian ambassador in 1967 that “Israel by itself was nothing. It depended for its existence on American aid, and the reason why the Americans kept Israel alive was because they wanted the oil of the Middle East. . . . The Americans could not themselves attack the Arab nation, but they could attack through Israel.”

As for the notion of Israel as part of a Jewish world plot, it derives from Nazi ideology. As early as the mid-1920’s, Adolf Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* about his suspicions of the Zionists’ ultimate goals: “They do not think at all of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine to live in it some day; rather, they want a central organization for their international world cheating, withdrawn from others’ reach—a refuge for convicted dregs and a college for aspiring swindlers.” And already in the mid-1930’s, an Arab writer says, Palestinian Arabs “lapped up fascist and Nazi lies. They saw the Zionists as the sinister world menace of the Nazi legend, and England as a puppet power in their clutches.”<sup>1</sup> Many Arab leaders—including such intellectuals as Michel Aflaq, Shakib Arslan, and Sati’ al-Husri, and politicians such as Rashid Ali al-Gilani and Sadat—also adopted this outlook.

In brief, Middle East politicians still today routinely echo the ideas of Lenin and Hitler, the men who initiated this century’s most appalling political experiments.

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The two conspiracies share parallel premises. Both dismiss disagreements between Jerusalem and Washington as charades to fool the gullible. Both postulate lock-step agreement between the two sides, and that in turn rules out independent decision-making. Only one of the two parties makes decisions and the other takes orders. One is the ventriloquist, the other the dummy; it may not be clear which is which, but the fundamental relationship is absolutely certain.

At this point the theories converge, the double conspiracy becomes one, and exact roles hardly matter. Americans and Israelis are working together to rule the world, so who cares which of them is dominant, which is subservient? Not being able to discern their real roles only makes the alliance that much more malevolent and sinister. Here is Radio Damascus on the subject: the bond “between Israel and the United States,” it pronounced in 1986, “makes Israel a U.S. tool directed against national-liberation movements in the region, and also makes U.S. foreign policy a tool for implementing Israeli policy.” Even Sadat, who studied the U.S.-Israeli nexus at first hand, came close to accepting this view. “Israel,” he wrote in his memoirs, “had come to assume the role of the only ‘power’ guarding U.S. interests in the Middle East. This was a role chosen by Israel herself, or even chosen for her by the United States.” Taha Yasin Ramadan came

up with an even more enigmatic formulation, referring to “Israel’s protégés—who created and nurtured it.”

The key to this thinking lies in two fantasies: (1) The Jews’ economic power permits them to run American foreign policy; and (2) this power is used for imperialist ends. It then follows that (3) the Zionists run U.S. policy and Washington depends heavily on Israel. Or, more succinctly: Jews rule America; Israel serves as part of their mechanism for world control. Of course, this train of thought assumes that both Lenin’s and Hitler’s ideas are correct—a rare combination in the West but commonplace in the Middle East.

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Belief in an imperialist plot enhances American influence in the Middle East while fears of a Zionist conspiracy diminish it. Hence, from the point of view of American interests, the imperialist conspiracy is preferable to the Zionist one. But Israel’s interest lies in undoing distorted perceptions of the U.S.-Israel relationship, for these prevent Muslim enemies from treating it as a normal country. As either pawn or puppeteer, Israel lacks ordinary state interests; whether used by or using the United States, it is connected to something too large to fit the Middle East; whether seen as an outpost of imperialism or as the headquarters of a conspiracy, the Jewish state becomes part of something too threatening to accommodate.

All this recalls the old demonization of Jews in Europe. And just as that demonization caused pogroms and culminated in the Nazi Holocaust, so there is a parallel danger when the Jewish state is made a menace to all humanity. Only when Israel comes to be regarded as a state like any other is there a chance that its neighbors will deal with it in accordance with conventional diplomatic norms.

There is little prospect of this happening soon, however, whatever the outcome of the present conflict. Wild claims about ties between the United States and Israel are not a fringe phenomenon in the Muslim Middle East but—as we have seen—integral to the fabric of its mainstream political life. Still, it is important that American diplomats and politicians take every opportunity to disabuse their Arab counterparts of the idea that U.S.-Israel relations are anything more than they appear to be. Sadat credited his own enlightenment to just such persuasion. “My talks with Dr. Kissinger convinced me,” he explained, “that he rejects the simplistic notion of some of your strategists who see—or saw—Israel as the American gendarme in this part of the world.” The reiteration of such plain truths may not by itself lead other Middle East leaders to emulate Sadat in making peace with the Jewish state—a prospect which appears distinctly unlikely at this time—but breaking the Arabs’ delusions about America and Israel is essential if they are ever to move in that direction.

<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, Arab leaders were also spouting the opposite accusation. In 1943, while the gas chambers were operating at full capacity, Faris al-Khuri of Syria asserted that “Zionists are *NAZIS*.” This calumny spread with the decades, becoming almost commonplace by 1982.