Roots of the Anti-Semitism in Islamic World

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Abstract

Anti-Semitism in the Islamic world is a controversial topic. While there has been no anti-Semitism in Islamic territory until 19th century, anti-Semitism was exported from West, and it found itself a base with Islamic references. Moreover, Palestinian-Israeli conflict-major factor of this tendencies-strengthened anti-Semitism in the Islamic world. This paper analyzes those roots of anti-Semitism in Islamic World by focusing on Koran and Islamic narratives, Islamic law, history of the Jewish-Muslim relations and Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Introduction

On November 5th, 2014, Israeli soldiers entered to Al-Aqsa Mosque with their heavy shoes-symbolically very humiliating event for Muslims- in Jerusalem, thus some parts of the mosque, and some Korans were damaged. Reactions from the Islamic world was very strong as it always happens in any Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of the reaction was from the governor of a Turkish town Edirne, in which Jews have had high population in Ottoman era. He declared after restoration of the Big Synagogue of Edirne that "We build their synagogues while they kill Muslims. I am execrably saying that. This restored Synagogue will be used only as a museum". In other words, he prohibited Jews to use the Synagogue for their religious practices because of the Israeli soldiers' disrespectfulness to Al-Aqsa Mosque. While this incident happened because of the high tension between far-right Orthodox Jews who tried to surround the mosque and Muslims who did not let them, its effects influenced even a small town in Turkey. It led a governor to make a hate speech even if Jews in Turkey are seen as very loyal ethnic minority. Starting from this simple example, anti-Semitism in the Islamic world and its roots will be analyzed in this paper. While Jews were under better conditions in Islam than in Christendom, it should be asked that how anti-Semitism could entered to the Islamic world and improved itself (Perry and Schweitzer, 2002, p.266). This paper will try to
answer these questions by analyzing Jew-Muslim relations in historical context, Islamic law, Koran's statements towards Jews, the exportation of anti-Semitism to the Islamic world and Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Koran and Jews**

The interpretation of Koran is very problematic issue. While, in a section of the Koran, it is seen that Jews are almost seen as superior or blessed nation. In Surah Al-Baqarah, it says, "Children of Israel, remember My favor that I have bestowed upon you and that I preferred you over the worlds" (Al- Baqarah 2/47). They are also cursed in a section of the same surah that says, "And they said, "Our hearts are wrapped." But, (in fact), Allah has cursed them for their disbelief, so little is it that they believe" (Al-Baqarah 2/88). In Koran, the term "Banû Isrâîl"-means "Children of Israel"- is used 43 times and the term Yahûd-means Jew- is used 11 times. According to Khalid Duran (2001), while in negative passages towards Jews, the term Yahûd is used, but in positive passages towards Jews, the term Banû Isrâîl is used (p.112). From this point of view, it is said by some theologists that Koran's view towards Jews is positive despite its negative sections. Of course, it can be said that Koran's positive sections do not justify its negative sections; however, those theologists also claim that those negative passages refer to those Jewish tribes that violated Constitution of Medina, which is signed between Muslims and Jewish tribes. 61st section of the Surat Al-Mā'idah legitimates them. This section says, "Indeed, those who have believed and those who were Jews or Sabians or Christians - those who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve" (Al-Mā'idah 5/69). However, there are also some theologists claiming that Koran explicitly consider Jews as enemies of Islam. This paper doesn't intend to take a position in this discussion, but this discussion is important to see what interpretations and which sections of the Koran is exploited to legitimate anti-Semitic ideas in the Islamic world.
Facts that are revealed above are one of the reasons why there were no specific anti-Semitism towards Jews until late 19th century in the Islamic world. However, it is seen in the Islamic world today that Koran’s interpretations is used to legitimate anti-Semitic ideas among Muslims. Additionally, according to Islam, Jesus did not die and is rescued by the Allah, thus it is hard to understand anti-Semitism in Islamic world by Western experiences and anti-Semitic background. In other sections, it will be revealed that how Koran’s interpretations are shaped by anti-Semitic Muslims.

**Dhimmi Law**

Jews were much better off under Islam than in Christendom (Perry and Schweitzer, 2002, p.266). Moreover, there has not been any specific anti-Semitic movement or attitude towards Jews in terms of European anti-Semitism until the late 19th century (Kramer, 2006, p.246). In order to understand why there was no anti-Semitism in the Islamic world, dhimmi system must be analyzed.

Dhimmi- means "protected person" - is a legal status of those non-Muslims in Islamic territory. In this system, religion of the dhimmis is recognized by authorities, they can freely practice their religion, and they can have their organizations. In other words, they had autonomy in the field of religion, education, social services and so forth. However, non-Muslims had to pay a poll tax-called jîzya to be protected. During early periods, only Jews, Christians and Sabians were accepted as dhimmis, but later on, dhimmi status came to apply to all of the non-Muslims. Hierarchically, Muslims also had higher positions than non-Muslims. Moreover, there were also some restrictions on social life for non-Muslims. For instance, they were not able to bear arms, they were not able to ride horses and they had to wear distinctive clothes. These practices were done obviously to draw a boundary between Muslims and Non-Muslims (Wistrich, 2002, p.6).
What has to be revealed that because all non-Muslims are seen as dhimmis, there were no specific segregation towards Jews. While Jews encountered some difficulties, all of the non-Muslim encountered it, or while Jews enjoyed some rights all of the dhimmis enjoyed it. Therefore, we cannot say that there were an anti-Semitism century (Kramer, 2006, p.248).

**Muslim-Jewish Relations in a Historical Context**

Relations between Muslims and Jews have begun at the beginning of the emergence of Islam-7th century. After the hejira-means immigration- of Muslims and Mohammed from Mecca to Medina, Muslims. While there was no Jewish community in Mecca, Medina consisted of Jewish tribes. Mohammed made an agreement-called Constitution of Medina-between all factions of Medina including thirteen Jewish tribes. According to this agreement, Jews can freely practice their religion, Muslims and Jews will live in peace, they will defend the town together against enemies, if one of the part of the contracting parties fight against a third enemy, the other part has to help them and Mohammed will be referee in case of a conflict between Jews and Muslims. In other words, rights of the Jews were secured as long as they support Muslims against enemies. However, Muslim and Jewish relations did not run well. Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Nadir, and Banu Qurayza were the three Jewish tribes that Mohammed had battles with because of the violation of the agreement. According to Muslim sources, they betrayed the agreement and Muslims. Therefore, Banu Quaynuqa and Banu Nadir tribes were deported from Medina, but males of the Banu Qurayza were killed, females and children of Banu Qurayza are sold as slaves (Ağari, 2007 p.139). According to Serjeant (1978), Mohammed explicitly took direct political action against only those three tribes and probably they had protection agreements or they were inactive in politic (p.3). This incident is the only real and big conflict between Muslims and Jews in the period until 19th century. It does not mean that there has been no discrimination, humiliation or persecution towards them. They suffered especially in Morocco, Yemen and Iran where they were only religious
minority. However, in the latter chapters, it will be seen that how this event is exploited for anti-Semitic ideas.

The period from 800 to 1250 is seen as the heyday of the Jews in Islam. After the decline of the great Arab Empire and the execution of the caliph by the Mongols, this period was over. The successor states were far less tolerant than the caliphs in which there has been growing economy and dynamic society for several centuries. In Ottoman period, Jews raised again as long as Ottomans raised in a more tolerant environment- even more tolerant than caliphs (Perry and Schweitzer, 2002, pp. 265-266). This period is also ended when Ottoman Empire started losing its power-around 1700.

**Exported Anti-Semitism and Nazi Propaganda**

According to Bernard Lewis (1986), Christian anti-Semitism has 2,000 years history, but Islamic anti-Semitism is something new in this century-20th century- and he also says that Palestinian and Israeli conflict has caused it to spread (p.283). However, there is also a preparation period, which started in 1840 when blood libels came to the Islamic world in Damascus. Perry and Schweitzer (2002) explain this event that anti-Semitism was introduced by Europeans and funneled into the Middle East by Arab Christians (p.268). At that time, Ottoman Empire lost the Syrian land because it was conquered by the ruler of Egypt-Muhammad Ali. There were two minority, which are Christians and Jews, in the area at that time, and there was a competition between Christians and Jews on economic and commercial positions. Because new rulers considered the West as their guarantee that can help them keep the land, they accorded new rights to Christians, and that's why balance between Jews and Christians changed in favor of Christians. In new system, dhimmi law was abolished, and Christians had almost same rights as Muslims have. They brought Catholic priests who also brought culture of the Catholic Europe and blood libels. When two of the monks were lost, Jews in the area were accused of killing them by other monks and French ambassador Ratti
Menton because of the Passover, thus some Jews were oppressed, synagogues were destroyed and more importantly, publications about blood libels emerged. Although, in the end, their innocence revealed, myths about Jews were learned for the first time. In other words, unfortunately, this incident caused introduction of anti-Semitism in the Islamic world.\(^1\) Kramer’s (2006) view is that blood libel accusations launched by local Christians and this is supported by European consultants, teachers and missionaries against local Jews, moreover, he consider Damascus blood libels as the most prominent example that introduced anti-Semitism to Islamic world (pp.255-256).

Anti-Semitism was Islamized by 1900 by using references to the Koran and Early Muslim literature (Perry and Schweitzer, 2002, p.268). As it is seen in the second and the fourth chapter, there were an infrastructure that can lead anti-Semitism, and finally in this period, this infrastructure was started to be exploited. The way of exploitations will be seen in other chapters.

August Rohling’s “Talmud Jew” was translated to the Arabic in 1899 and more importantly, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” were translated to the Arabic in 1921 by a Greek Orthodox editor and the first attested Arabic translation appeared in 1926 in the Catholic journal Ragib Şahyün in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Mein Kampf started to be talked in 1934 (Kramer, 2006, p.257). Finally, Lewis (1986) says that the rise of Islamic anti-Semitism started in early 1930s, when Young Egypt Society began publishing Nazi-style anti-Jewish propaganda in Cairo (283). As a result, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s leader Hasan al-Banna, who was attracted by fascist notions, set up propaganda and assaults on local Jews based on Islamic anti-Semitic references and European anti-Semitic stereotypes in 1940s.

\(^1\) For more information about Damascus blood libel: http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/2.209/what-are-the-origins-of-muslim-anti-semitism-1.274106
(Kramer, 2006, p.257). It can be said at that point that Islamic infrastructure found itself a base with European anti-Semitism.

As regards to the Nazi Propaganda, Arab- Nazi collaboration-particularly, collaboration between Haj Amin al- Husseini who was the Palestinian nationalist leader and Hitler-is a known fact. Nazi officials working with the Arab exiles saw that the Koran, Arab literature, and their interpretations were able to serve very strong European anti-Semitism. By referring to these sources, they were able to supplement secular appeals to Arab nationalists with religiously based appeals to Muslims as Muslims. For this purpose, they emphasized the ancient traditions of hatred of the Jews in Islam itself and Nazi Germany presented itself as an ally of Arab anti-imperialism as well as a soul mate of the religion of Islam. As a result, Nazi radio broadcasts made very anti-Semitic propaganda on Arabs. In this propagandas, friendship of Islam and Nazis were depicted and Jews were seen as other. Mutual hatred - towards Jews- of Hitler and Haj Amin al- Husseini played an important role at this point. More importantly, these broadcasts reached a far large audience and that’s why it has to said that Nazi propaganda played an important role on the formation of anti-Semiticism in Islamic world (Herf, 2009, pp.711-715).

**Palestinian-Israeli Conflict**

Development of the Zionist project caused growing anxiety in the Arab and the Muslim world at large (Kramer, 2006, p.262). In this anxious psychology, Palestinian leader Haj Amin al- Husseini gained very high profile, and he was an idolized leader in the Arab and Muslim world despite his failed collaboration with Nazis. Since, he is still an idol among the Muslim world, his anti-Semitic ideas still survive in the Muslim world. Therefore, the idolized leader factor conveys high importance at this point.
The creation of the Israel in 1948 and the defeat of Arab armies caused a traumatic shock for Arabs. This is known as al-nakba-the catastrophe-in Arab world. Later on, Nasser and Ba'th regimes that aimed to shatter Israel strengthened Arab nationalism. There has been rise of the anti-Semitic publications, such as Protocols and Mein Kampf. This was the first time that this kind of books were published and translated by Muslims in several Muslim countries (Kramer, 2006, p.266). At this point, it can be said that until Zionism met with Islam, anti-Semitism in Islamic territory had external or Christian source as it has been explained above; however, after that point, Islamic world began to produce its own sources.

Although Arab resistance is against Zionism, it is seen that there is a generalization of Jews and Zionists-despite Arab literature that distinguish Jews and Zionists. While this generalization has been done by the Muslim psychology that thinks all the Christendom and Jews-basically whole west- are against them, Zionists claiming that they represent all Jews have a crucial role here (Flores, 2006, p.329).² As a result of this generalization, regardless their political views, attacks of the Palestinians have been against Jewish individuals as it happened during the riots of 1920, 1921, 1929, the revolt of 1936-1939 and in the present time. Last example were seen after the incident on November 5th 2014 that Palestinian drivers plowed into Israelis.³ Moreover, in the social media, it has been seen that Muslims around the world-of course some of them-were happy to see that a Palestinian killed some innocent Jews. More badly, a newspaper, which has religious followers, in Turkey published news that contains Nazi propaganda. There were also a puzzle that contains a picture of the Hitler in the newspaper and the key word of the puzzle was “we are looking for you”.⁴ When Israel attacks

³ News about this incident can be found here: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/world/middleeast/jerusalem-israel-jordan-palestinians.html?_r=0
⁴ Those news can be found on the website of the newspaper :http://www.habervaktim.com/haber/379264/akitten-hitlerli-sifre-seni-ariyoruz.html
on Gaza, hashtags like #hitlerwasright are getting more obvious on twitter or people asks Hitler “why did not you kill all of them” on Facebook.

It is seen in the chapters above that Koran has no totally negative view towards Jews and moreover, there are more positive sections than negative ones. However, these sections and the conflict between Muslims and Jewish tribes were used for Islamic anti-Semitism later on. Muhammad Sayyid al-Tantawi's "The Children of Israel in the Quran and Sunna" that show Jews as the enemies of the Islam and human beings with Islamic references published in 1966 by the contribution of the al-Azhar University. Sayid Qutb's "Our Struggle with the Jews" is also one of the best-known publication that is anti-Semitic with Islamic references (Kramer, 2006, pp 268-269). Lastly, Hamas covenant that has lots of references to Islam and "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" can be seen as an example as well. Koran and Mohammed targets a part of the Jews, but these sources generalize all Jews with those references (Kramer, 2006, p.270). While these references were not used to treat Jews as an enemy and there was no generalization upon them until Palestinian-Israeli conflict emerged, this conflict caused a high anti-Semitism that contains Islamic and European references.

**Conclusion**

Koran and Islamic narratives have an infrastructure that can lead anti-Semitism, but interpretations of Koran and narratives were not in an anti-Semitic way until Islam met with European anti-Semitism. Dhimmi system also prevented anti-Semitism in the Islamic world. However, anti-Semitism taught to the Islamic world by external factors first, but when Palestinian-Israeli conflict emerged, Muslims started produce its own sources and began mixing European anti-Semitism with Islamic references. Palestinian leader Haj Amin al-Husseini and Nazis also has a crucial effect here. The new literature sees all Jews as an enemy of the Islam, and human beings and this anti-Semitism also consider all Jews as Zionists, thus it leads assaults on individual Jews.
References


