

ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS: BASHAR AL-ASAD, ISRAEL, AND THE JEWS

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Following the events of September 2000, the outbreak of the second Intifada, Israel's fast-deteriorating relationship with the Palestinians (and with the Arab world in general), and the growing tension between Syria and Israel, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad verbally attacked Israel, the Jews, and Judaism on a number of occasions. In his address to the Islamic countries' summit in Qatar, on 13 November 2000, Asad said:

This Israeli patronizing, and the unmoral deeds so far from the values and teachings of all the Monotheist religions, would not have taken place without the approval and support of many countries and factors. The Israelis kill, and the Arabs and Muslims are blamed for terrorism and antisemitism, although it is known for certain that we are the most ancient Semites. They trample over human rights, and we are censured as inhuman and primitive. They curse the old Nazis, while applying Neo-Nazism unheard of in history....

Having repeated and emphasized his country's commitment to the principle of territories for peace as one of the conditions for negotiating with Israel (among other requirements), Asad added: "This is our position which we repeat...at every opportunity; we are positively convinced that humanity cannot be divided at random into a chosen people and all the other peoples...."¹

At the Islamic summit in Amman, on the 27 March 2001, Bashar al-Asad thus described the Israelis during his address:

We say: a racist prime-minister; we say: a racist government; we say: racist military and security [services]; yet when we get to the Israeli society, we keep quiet. By which logic? All the things I have just listed are products of the Israeli street. If so, then this is a racist society, more racist than Nazism.²

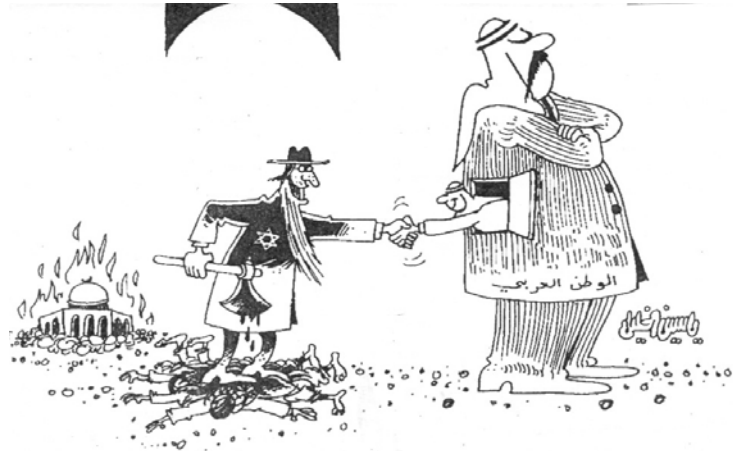
During his visit to Spain at the end of April 2001, Bashar al-Asad repeated the comparison of Israel with Nazism; and at the reception on the Pope's historic visit to Damascus in the beginning of May, he said the following:

There are those who always seek to repeat the agony march of all the people: we see our brothers in Palestine murdered and tortured, justice trampled and lands in Lebanon, the Golan and Palestine conquered in this way. We hear them killing the principle of equality, saying that "God has created our people separately from other peoples"; we see them mistreating the places sacred to Islam and Christianity in Palestine, violating the sanctity of the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. They are trying to kill all the values of the Monotheist religions,

¹ See President Asad's address to the Islamic summit in Qatar, 13 Nov. 2000 on the official website of the Syrian Ministry of Information: www.moi-syria.com

² President Asad's address at the Islamic summit in Amman, 27 Mar. 2001, a booklet published by *Tishrin* (Damascus) [enclosed with the newspaper].

with the same mentality that brought about the betrayal and torturing of Christ and in the same way that they tried to betray the Prophet Muhammad....³



Tishrin, 29-5-2001

A window opens in the Arab World. On Left: the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, burning.

Young Asad's words caused a diplomatic and public chorus of disapproval outside of Syria. While one could interpret this as a novice leader's slip of the tongue, neither the Syrian government nor Asad himself washed their hands of what had been said, but stood behind those words, attempting to claim that it was misunderstood. A notice by an "official spokesman" was published in Damascus, rejecting the American Foreign Ministry's condemning response as a "cover-up" for the policy of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The spokesman stated that Asad had not targeted the believers of the Jewish faith, but rather tried to draw attention to Israel's actions against the Palestinians; he also mentioned that the Arabs are themselves Semites, and that "blaming us for antisemitism is a historically non-valid libel." During the Pope's departure, Asad himself said that "in the world there are still those who are afraid of the mere mentioning of historical facts and international resolutions and blame us, Semites, for antisemitism."⁴

Similar things were said by the Syrian president in interviews with European media during his visits to Paris and Berlin in June and July 2001, where members of the Jewish community, among others, protested his antisemitic expressions. In an interview to the German *Der Spiegel*, Asad again said that the Syrians are themselves Semites, and mentioned that Judaism is a religion "open to any race." He insisted that he simply compared the suffering of Jesus to that of the Palestinians. When the interviewer observed that mentioning Jesus' suffering implies that the Jews are to blame for it, Asad replied: "these are historical facts, which we cannot deny. But how could anyone consider me anti-Jewish, while we have Jewish citizens here in Syria, and we as Muslims acknowledge the Jewish faith?"⁵

In a prior interview for the French *Le Figaro* which was translated into Arabic and printed in part in the Syrian press, Asad used the same arguments and repeated the analogy between

³ *Al-Hayat* (London), 6 May 2001; *Al-Thawra* (Damascus), 6 May 2001.

⁴ *Al-Hayat*, 9 May 2001; *Al-Thawra*, 9 May 2001.

⁵ *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 9 July 2001, FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, USA), 9 July 2001.

the suffering of Jesus and the Palestinian plight; he also explained that his reference to “betraying the Prophet Muhammad” was made in the context of “betraying the peace process.” In an interview with French TV channel France 2 on 21 June, he again associated Jesus’ agony with that of the Palestinians and the “plot against Prophet Muhammad and the one that Israel has been plotting since the beginning of the peace negotiations.”⁶ And even as late as the end of 2003, An English-language Syrian website referred to the Pope’s visit to Syria as a grand success that established the central status of Syria and its leader in the world media; it cited Bashar al-Asad’s antisemitic public statements during the Pope’s reception and departure—especially the parts comparing Jesus and the Jews with the Palestinians and Israel; these citations are considered to be at the heart of the Syrian media’s “high score.”⁷

Who actually is Bashar al-Asad? What is the origin of his harsh antisemitic public statements? What are the perceptions, ideology, and attitudes towards Jews and Judaism held by the President of Syria, Israel’s neighbor? Have he and his regime inherited these perceptions from the regime of his father, Hafiz al-Asad, Syria’s leader from 1970–2000; and what were and are the positions of the two regimes with regard to Jews and Judaism? What are the roots and sources of these positions? This paper aims to answer these questions empirically, focusing on Bashar al-Asad’s relatively short term of government so far, and looking back to the last ten years of his father’s rule. During that decade, Asad strove to reach a political settlement with Israel, which did not come into being. Did the years of negotiation with the Jewish State change the Syrian leadership’s attitudes towards Jews and Judaism as expressed in the Syrian public sphere?

THE LEGACY OF THE FATHER

On the 17 November 1970, Hafiz al-Asad, a military officer of the ‘Alawi minority ethnic group, a long-standing member of the Ba’th Party, and father of Bashar al-Asad took over Damascus in a military coup.⁸ Contrary to the unconcealed antisemitism of many previous Syrian statesmen, however, Hafiz al-Asad avoided open attacks on Judaism, trying to keep the distinction between Zionism and Judaism in his official statements and public appearances: “We do not hate Judaism as a religion, but we do hate Zionism as a Colonialist intruder.” On a different occasion, he clarified the following to an American journalist: “I do not have any hostility towards the Jewish faith, or towards a Jew as a religious person. But the Jews in Israel—that’s a different issue. Those Jews are our enemies....”⁹

This distinction has not always been observed, especially where senior members of the Asad regime were concerned, rather than official spokespersons. A most typical example is the *Matzo of Zion* (*Fatir Sahyun*, Damascus 1984) written by Mustafa Tlas, Syrian Minister of Defense from 1972 until recently, and one of Hafiz al-Asad’s closest and highest-ranking political aides (the two had been close friends since the 1950s, when they studied together at the military academy).¹⁰ Tlas’s book revived one of the most famous blood libels in modern

⁶ *Tishrin*, 23 June 2001; on the France 2 interview, see *Le Monde* (Paris), 23 June 2001.

⁷ “Syria Scores it High with the World Media,” www.syria-online.com/news_artc/pope_mediawin.html

⁸ Moshe Ma’oz, *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 119–21.

⁹ Moshe Ma’oz, *Asad, The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 105.

¹⁰ Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), 148–49, 181.

Jewish history, the “Damascus Affair” (1840). The affair had originated with some local Christians and the French consul, but was soon widely spread. The Jews of Damascus and the heads of the community in particular had been accused of the ritual murder of a Franciscan superior, Father Thomas, and of using his blood to bake matzos (the unleavened bread used during Passover). This blood libel had been previously presented as genuine, with “evidence” from a historiographic paper from the early 1960s by a professor from Damascus and Amman universities. *Matzot of Zion* repeated these accusations, linking them with Zionism, which allegedly had been active at that early a time.¹¹ The book was printed by Mustafa Tlas’s private publishing house, “Dar Tlas,” which specializes in books the Asad administration deems appropriate, including a Syrian edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, translated into Arabic by ‘Ajaj Nuwayhid, a Palestinian.¹²

In response to a Jewish NGO’s statement before the UN Commission on Human Rights, which cited from *Matzot of Zion* as an example, a Syrian diplomat appeared on 8 February 1991 before the Commission holding a copy of the book, and saying she trusted that “those who [had read] the book and learned about the circumstances surrounding Father Thomas’s murder [were] well-equipped to understand the reality of racist Zionism.” Following the protest started by Jewish organizations and soon joined by state representatives, mainly from the West, another Syrian delegate appeared before the Commission and returned to the Asad regime’s official line of reasoning, according to which Zionism and Judaism were, in fact, two “completely different things.”¹³

Matzot of Zion continues to be printed by Dar Tlas publishing house, and has even enjoyed renewed popularity among readers, and is widely referred to and cited in Syria.¹⁴ In 2001, an Egyptian weekly reported that Mustafa Tlas sold the rights to an Egyptian producer, who was planning to film it as a response to *Schindler’s List*.¹⁵ In a 2003 interview with the London-based *al-Sharq al-Ansat*, Tlas himself said that “the *Matzot of Zion* took place in Damascus, I didn’t make it up, and it is supported by documentation. It describes some Jewish rituals. How can the Zionists deny this reality? They do not want anyone to know about their hostile morality, so they target anyone who exposes them with this hostility....”¹⁶

¹¹ Moshe Ma’oz, “The image of the Jew in Official Arab Literature and Communications Media” (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Shazar Library, 1975); Mustafa Tlas, *Fatir Sahyun* (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1984).

¹² Seale, *Asad*, 349; see examples of books glorifying Hafiz al-Asad published by Dar Tlas: Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 221–23; ‘Ajaj Nuwayhid, translator, *Brutukulat Hukama Sabiun* [Protocols of the Elders of Zion] (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1984); Nuwayhid’s translation was first published in Beirut in 1967. See Yehoshaphat Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes to Israel* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 518. Among the books published by Dar Tlas was that by Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy, *Filastin, ard al-risalat al-samawiyya* [Palestine, land of divine messages], translated into Arabic by Qusay Atasi and Michel Wakim (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1988); first published as *La Palestine: terre des messages divins* (Paris: Albatros, 1986). Tlas, *Fatir Sahyun*.

¹³ David Littman, “Syria’s Blood Libel Revival at the UN: 1991–2000,” *Midstream*, 46, no. 2 (Feb.–Mar. 2000): 3–4.

¹⁴ On the success of *Matzot of Zion* at the 2002 International Book fair in Damascus, see: *al-Hayat*, 21 Oct. 2002.

¹⁵ *Ruz al-Yusuf* (Cairo), 24 Feb. 2001.

¹⁶ *Al-Sharq al-Ansat* (London), 10 Aug. 2003.

Following global changes since the late 1980s and American pressure, a gradual shift toward negotiating a political settlement was reflected in a slow yet systematic process of preparing public opinion in Syria for the possibility of peace with Israel, especially during 1992–1996.¹⁷ Despite this process, articles attacking Judaism and the Jews were still published in the Syrian press. The Syrian army gazette, *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, a bi-weekly with influence on the Syrian public sphere, served as a main outlet for this type of items, combined with comments on the Israeli-Arab conflict.¹⁸ Note that the Syrian military is highly identified with the regime, and is regarded as an “ideological army,” i.e., an instrument for advancing the ideology of the government and of the Ba‘th Party.¹⁹

On 1 May 1990, for example, journalist Suhayl Fatira published an article in *Jaysh al-Sha'b* on the subject of Israel’s influence on U.S. institutes for strategic studies, listing academics such as Samuel Huntington and Walter Laqueur. Fatira concluded with a “cite” by “former U.S. President” [*sic*] Benjamin Franklin, who had supposedly predicted “the great threat to the U.S., the Jewish threat.... [I]f we do not legally prevent Jews from entering the United States, they will gain control over it within one century.” The illustration showed a photograph of Meir Kahane, and at his side a Star of David superimposed on a swastika. (The “Franklin Prophecy,” a classic antisemitic fabrication from the 1930s, has in recent years enjoyed a wave of media citations in the Arab world).²⁰

During the volatile negotiations with Syria over the years, and even during the periods of progress, Israel was accused again and again of misleading, of spreading deceptive rumors, and of nurturing illusions.²¹ This was much more so at the beginning of the process, when, in an interview with ABC’s Diane Sawyer on the eve of the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, Hafiz al-Asad said that “it has become clear to all the nations of the world that Israel is not interested in a just and comprehensive agreement.... Israel keeps putting new obstacles in the way of all peace efforts....” This was presented to the Syrian public and military not as a mere political view, but under the title “Exposing Zionist Ideology.” The Madrid Conference itself was described as “a court [to judge] Israel, for falsifying history.”²² It is certainly acceptable, during political processes and peace negotiations, to raise doubts about a partner’s integrity and sincerity, regardless of whether it is done as a deliberate tactic, or as sincere distrust stemming from long years of political and military hostility. However, the repetitive nature of these allegations, along with harsh antisemitic expressions, should raise a question mark, since the Jews have been repeatedly portrayed as traitors, as breachers of agreements, as intriguers and deceivers from the medieval religious Islamic literature up to

¹⁷ Eyal Zisser, *Asad’s Legacy: Syria in Transition* (London: Hurst and Co., 2001), 108.

¹⁸ On the significance and influence of *Jaysh al-Sha'b* on the Syrian Ba‘thist public opinion see, e.g., Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History* (New York: Library Press, 1973), 13–14.

¹⁹ Volker Perthes, “Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum: state building, national security and war preparation in Syria,” in *War, Institutions and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed. Steven Heydemann, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 153–54, 159–60; idem, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London and New York: I. B.Tauris, 1995), 146–54; on the image of the military in Syria as an “ideological army” implementing Party decisions, see Ma‘oz, *Asad*, 60–61; Zisser, *Asad’s Legacy*, 28.

²⁰ *Jaysh al-Sha'b* (Damascus), 1 May 1990; on the “Franklin Prophecy” and further citations of it in the Arab world, see: www.Adl.org/Anti_Semitism/arab/anti_sem_myth.asp

²¹ See, e.g., Hani Muqbil, “The Impossible Israeli Illusion,” *Jaysh al-Sha'b* (Damascus), 1 June 1993.

²² *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Oct. 1991, 1 Nov. 1991.

modern political and educational Arab literature.²³ Hafiz al-Asad himself said, in a message to his army on its 45th anniversary in 1991, that “Zionism acts with cunning to maneuver the changes in the world for the benefit of ‘Israel’ [*si*] and to reject any sincere effort at peace.”²⁴ Later in this message Asad returned to the old favorite image of the conflict between Syria and Israel as a mythical struggle of Good and Evil: “We have been building this nation's power based on elements of good and right...while our enemy, who conquered our land, has been building its power of evil, with all the implications. How great is the difference between the power of goodness and the forces of evil.”²⁵ Four years later, after spending much time in the negotiations with Israel, when asked about Israel in the Egyptian *al-Abram*, Asad once more expressed his opinion: “I believe they wish for us a dark future....”²⁶

This opinion was backed by commentaries which presented Israel as not merely thwarting the peace process, which Asad and his aides perceived as an extension of the fight against Israel in political means, but also as the enemy of the whole of humanity: “The fight for peace...is not, as it may superficially seem, a matter between the Arabs and Israel only, but in principle a struggle of the whole world on the one hand, and Zionism and Israel on the other. The peace process bears historical significance on the international level, since success would benefit the whole of mankind, by blocking the way to the most reactionary political movement in history, and put an end to the dangers of the most aggressive state in the world.”²⁷ And in an interview with the Gulf radio station *Sawt al-Kuwait* on 18 May 1992, Hafiz al-Asad let slip some words to dispel all doubt that he in fact equated the State of Israel and Zionism with the Jewish faith: “In Israel they see their movement as targeting all Arabs, and they say so in their books, the Torah and the Talmud. They say: your land, Israel, [*is*] from the Euphrates to the Nile.”²⁸

Demonization of “World Zionism” and of the Israelis and linking their negative traits, according to the writer, to the “roots of Zionism in Judaism” appeared in publicist Suhayl Fatira’s article on “Terrorism and Murder in Zionist Thought: A Legacy Passed from Fathers to Sons.” Fatira writes that “in spite of the propaganda of the Israeli Labor Party as a left-wing party, all political parties in Israel are legally descendants of World Zionism with its racist views and aspirations to create the greater Israel. They are one body, and the only difference is whether the terror is carried out by the right hand or by the left one.” In order to prove the close link between Zionism and Judaism, the writer described the religious Right Gush Emunim movement (“Bloc of the Faithful”), the right-wing Ha-Tehiya Party, and the far-right Kach (founded by Meir Kahane, and condemned in Israel, its listing for the Knesset forbidden, and eventually outlawed altogether).²⁹ Dr. Sayyah ‘Azzam, a brigadier general in the Syrian army published an article on 1 November 1992 under the title “The Dangerous Zionist Octopus: Zionism Sees in Nazi Crimes and Jewish Votes Profitable

²³ Ma‘oz, *The Image of the Jew*, 11–12.

²⁴ *Al-Ba‘th* (Damascus), 1 Aug. 1990.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Al-Abram* (Cairo), 11 Oct. 1995.

²⁷ Turqi Samiya, “Why Does Israel Thwart the Peace Efforts,” *Jaysh al-Sha‘b*, 1 June 1991.

²⁸ *Sawt al-Kuwait*, 18 May 1992.

²⁹ *Jaysh al-Sha‘b*, 15 Aug 1992.

Merchandise.” He wrote that “World Zionism” had exploited changes to “strengthen its control” over Europe, cited claims that “no more than 70,000 Jews died during WWII,” and finally accused “the Zionists” of attempts to murder well-known Holocaust deniers such as David Irving and others.³⁰



Jaysh al-Sha'b, 15-7-1992

There is no difference between the political parties in Israel: The Likud and Labor parties on a sinking pirate ship. Israeli elder statesman Shimon Peres (recently elected as president) is seen trembling aboard.

In 1993–1996, when Israel and Syria seemed close to signing a peace agreement, the Syrian media temporarily reduced the level of its attacks on Jews and Judaism. Yet during this period, too, voices were heard from time to time, expressing the same concepts. For example, following the murder of Israeli Prime-Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an assassin from the extreme-right, Yigal ‘Amir, in November 1995, Sayyah ‘Azzam wrote:

Fanaticism and terrorism have a long history and deep roots in Israel. Rabin’s murderer claimed he had followed God’s order, and the settler Baruch Goldstein before him, who in 1994 murdered 29 Arab citizens during prayer, claimed he too had received his orders from God.... [Although the Goldstein massacre was glorified as a heroic act by some extremists, it appalled and shocked the Israeli mainstream.] It means that fanaticism and terrorism are long-timers in Jewish history.... The proportion of criminals, perverts, and suicide-committers in Israel is high, as a result of inner problems and racist education, based on an ideology of God’s chosen people, and Jewish supremacy.³¹

A little time later, this concept was echoed again in an article by Lieutenant Colonel Nawfal Sharif Hasan, entitled “The Fruits of the Torah-inspired Ideology in Israel.” Nawfal associated social fragmentations in Israel to its reliance on a “Torah-inspired ideology,” like the concept of “God’s chosen people.” He determined that “there is an undoubtedly strong

³⁰ Ibid., 1 Nov. 1992.

³¹ Ibid., 1 Dec 1995.

link between religion and Zionist ideology. The Jewish faith is the chief source of this ideology.”³²

After Binyamin Netanyahu won the May 1996 elections in Israel, and during the break in the negotiations between Syria and Israel, attacks against the Jews and the Jewish faith in the Syrian media intensified, not distinguishing between Judaism and Zionism, and showing support for Holocaust deniers.³³ Publicist Bassam al-Khalid, in an article titled with the neologism *dimuqrahudiyya*, a neologism mockingly combining democracy and Judaism claimed that the Jewish lobby hurt democracy and basic freedoms in the West, so much so that “you are only free when you can keep away from the ‘Jews’ [*si*] and from the interests and facts related to Jewish ideology.” As an instance of Jewish influence, Khalid referred to the asylum given in Europe to writers such as Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin, who criticized aspects of Islam, compared with the “persecution” of Holocaust deniers Roger Garaudy and Paul Rassinier; the latter, Khalid maintained, was arrested in the 1950s along with his publisher, after printing a book which had uncovered the “lie of the ‘Holocaust’ [*si*].” According to Khalid, the Jewish lobby also “distorts the image of Islam in the name of democracy.” To further illustrate how Jews abuse the freedom of speech, Khalid brought the example of Mustafa Tlas, the publication of whose book, *Matzo of Zion*, provoked a scandal, and the “threats he received from Jews at the heart of the French Capital, and yet not one medium in the whole West came to protect democratic thought and freedom of opinion, while no one can deny the evidence, historical facts, and documents which *Matzo of Zion* consists of.”³⁴ Syrian political criticism against Netanyahu’s policy was also full of familiar attacks on Judaism: “The policy of Netanyahu’s Talmudic mind is hostile to the Arabs in particular and to the world in general, based on the lie of ‘God’s chosen people’...”³⁵

In an interview to the London *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Mustafa Tlas himself verbally abused the Jews once more. After the consolation visit of Jordan’s King Hussein to Israel following the murder of Israeli schoolgirls by a Jordanian soldier near the border area, Tlas said: “Why should we weep for Sara and Rachel, rather than Khadija and Fatima when United States policy has put on the garments of an old Jewish Rabbi?” Here Tlas, a known lover of literature and poetry, quoted prominent Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, one of the bluntest of protesters against peace and normalization in the Arab world’s relations with Israel.³⁶

After the Monika Lewinsky affair became well-known world-wide, the Syrian press referred to it as an Israeli-Jewish conspiracy, aimed to neutralize the U.S. president’s influence:

Monika is a Jew; the lawyers who volunteered to represent her are Jews;
Monika’s friends who recorded her hot phone calls with President Clinton were

³² Ibid., 15 Oct. 1996.

³³ For attacks on the “lexicon of the Torah,” “the principles of the Torah claiming that Israel’s country stretches from the Nile to the Euphrates,” and the “Torah mentality,” see *Radio Damascus*, 29 June 1996, 10 July 1996, 21 July 1996; “Garaudy’s Facts Uncover the Myths at the Base of Israeli Policy,” *Jaysh al-Sha’b*, 1 Dec. 1996.

³⁴ Ibid., 15 June 1996.

³⁵ Sayyah ‘Azzam, “The Israeli Maneuvers and Lies Mislead No one,” *Jaysh al-Sha’b*, 1 Sept. 1997.

³⁶ Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 255–59. Like other Syrian intellectuals, Qabbani himself lives in exile, in London. The above-mentioned poem was published in the Egyptian *al-Abram*.

Jews, and the *Washington Post* which first made it public is a Jewish newspaper.... The plot was well-planned right from the beginning. Its goal was to embarrass President Clinton, to blackmail him and to weaken his status when he is faced with the Netanyahu government.³⁷



Tishrin, 15-4-2001

As demonstrated above, it is not surprising that the attacks on Jews and Judaism continued after Ehud Barak was elected prime minister in May 1999 and the two states resumed negotiations. An analogy was drawn between the “expanding Zionist policy” and “Nazi geopolitics of *Lebensraum*.”³⁸ Israel’s national school curriculum was accused of distorting the human image of the Arabs, Arab history and culture, and Islam; the curriculum was compared to “[didactic] schools of a totalitarian ideology, such as the Fascist, Nazi, and Communist schools....” It was even claimed that kindergarten children in Israel sing “unanimously, guided by their teachers” in reciting a rhyme wishing the Arabs dead.³⁹

In the summer of 1999, articles were published in Syria which argued that Zionism and Judaism are behind the “Satanism.” Bassam al-Khalid was prominent among the writers when he published in his regular column in *Jaysh al-Sha‘b* a piece bearing the title “*al-Sahyunariyya*” [a neologism combining *Sahyunariyya* and *nar*, Zionism and hell]. According to him, a new book was published under this title, and he interviewed the author, who explained to the journalist that the “name given to the most dangerous movement founded by the Jews, is based on a meeting of the Rabbis and elders of Zion, who convened to clandestinely establish a satanic alliance whose name derives from Lucifer.... Global Zionism today is based on the old notion of Zionism and the new notion of Satanism.” Khalid concludes with a question: “is there anything uglier than the devil, apart from Zionism?”⁴⁰

³⁷ *Tishrin al-Ushbi‘i* [the Weekly Supplement], 24 Aug. 1998; cf. Husayn Hamawi, “The Spotted Zionist Rope,” *al-Ushbi‘ al-Adabi*, 24 Feb. 2000.

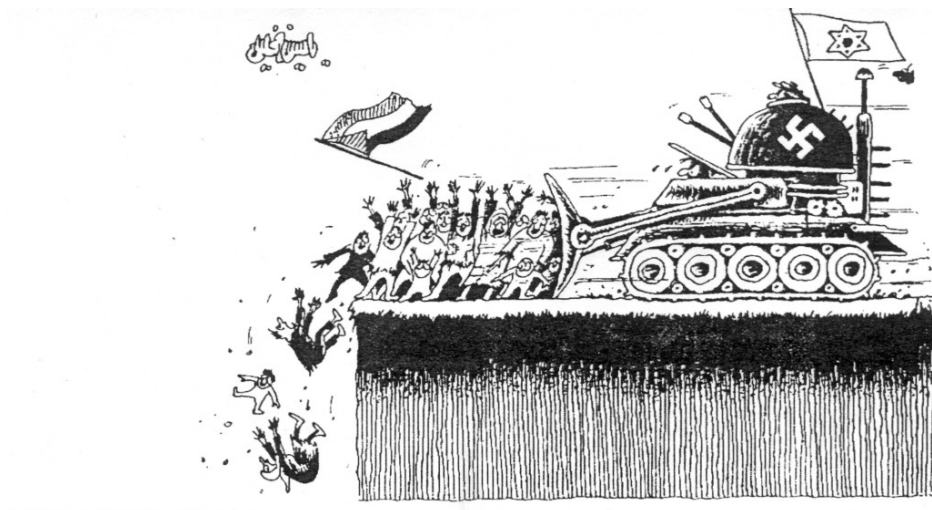
³⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Hasan Ahmad Hasan, “The Expanding Zionist State—Inheritor to Nazi Geopolitics,” *Jaysh al-Sha‘b*, 1 July 1999.

³⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Akram al-Shibli, “Aggressive Cultural Perceptions in Curricula for Israeli Children,” *Jaysh al-Sha‘b*, 1 Aug. 1999.

⁴⁰ Akram al-Shibli, “The New Religions,” *ibid.* 15.8.1999; Bassam al-Khalid, “*al-Sahyunariyya*” [the Zionism-hell], *Jaysh al-Sha‘b*, 15 Sept. 1999.

In another article in this newspaper, the writer claimed that Zionism and antisemitism are only seemingly in conflict, but in fact cooperate: Zionism reignites antisemitism every time it fades, using it for its own purposes. The attacks targeting Jewish institutes around the world are not carried out by the locals, but by “Zionist agents and the Ben-Gurion youth”: “when a serious and neutral investigation is conducted into the bombing of the Jewish community house in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1994, it will definitely be discovered that the planners and operators of the bombing are Zionist agents.” This piece, too, relied on a Soviet source.⁴¹

Those attacks climaxed in the culture and media with an op-ed published in one of the principal platforms of the Syrian public sphere—the official daily *Tishrin*. Editorials published in this newspaper directly reflect the opinion of the heads of government in order to make them publicly known. In this article, Muhammad Khayr al-Wadi, then editor of *Tishrin*, blamed “Zionism” for purposely having the Nazis’ non-Jewish victims forgotten, claiming that the leaders of Zionism terrorized the Jews and cooperated with the Nazis in order to encourage them to immigrate to Palestine. At present, he claimed, Israel and Zionist organizations are making up stories of the Holocaust, in order to gain funds and “use the myth of the holocaust like a sword” against opposers of Zionism, who are accused of antisemitism. Al-Wadi concluded by calling on the world’s countries to “resist the epidemic of the Neo-Nazi plague nesting in Israel, spreading its poisons and dangers everywhere it can reach.... This is the plague of the twentieth century, which has been transferred into the third millenium.”



Tishrin, 16-4-2002

Israel and the Palestinians during the second Intifada

⁴¹ Nawfal Sharif Hasan, “Zionism and Antisemitism,” *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 15 Oct. 1999. The Soviet source: *Zionism and Fascism* (Moscow, 1975). The writer also relied on an Egyptian source, *Al-Yahud wal-Yahudiyya* [Jews and Judaism] (Dar al-Akhbar, Egypt, 1997), and, he claims, also on unspecified “archive documents.”

FROM OPHTHALMOLOGIST TO HEIR APPARENT

On 10 June 2000, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad died, after thirty years in power. Forty days of public mourning were announced, as speedy steps were taken to appoint Bashar al-Asad, the deceased president's son, to inherit the various roles his father formerly filled: president of Syria, commanding general of its armed forces, and leader of the ruling Ba'th Party.⁴²

In his thirties, Bashar al-Asad was chosen to succeed his father, after his elder brother Basil, the designated heir, had died in a road accident in 1994.⁴³ Bashar al-Asad, an ophthalmologist by profession, had never been designated for any political role, and as far as we know, had had no ambitions in this direction. When his brother died, Bashar was getting his subspecialty qualifications in Britain; he was immediately summoned back to Syria, and from that time on until his father's death, he was trained as successor.⁴⁴ It remains unclear what his ideological training consisted of, but his father Hafiz al-Asad made a non-equivocal statement in an interview to the French television in July 1998: "I desire my successor to adhere to [the same way and values] to which I adhere."⁴⁵

The consistency of Syrian foreign policy is especially clear when Israel is concerned.⁴⁶ Similar to his father, Bashar encourages the "refusal organizations" calling for a "comprehensive and just peace" with Israel, in exchange to returning the Golan Heights to Syria up to the June 4, 1967 borders, although in the context of the second Intifada he also demanded a parallel solution on the Palestinian track, including the refugee problem.⁴⁷ Yet in a March 2003 interview for the Lebanese *al-Safir*, Bashar said that

Israel has an anomalous structure, a state with only one shade, a religious one, and its democracy is within that color, and not within the state borders. So, even if the peace process succeeds, it is impossible that Israel should be a legitimate state, since its structure is anomalous in the region, perhaps in the whole world.⁴⁸

But this statement, too, intended for current drifts in certain circles, is not very far from Hafiz al-Asad's view of the conflict in terms of "good versus evil," and of the peace process as "continuing the struggle in different ways."⁴⁹

On the ideological level, contrary to former expectations, Bashar indeed seems to be a faithful disciple of his father. Bashar was brought up in Syrian schools under his father's regime, where the curriculum is reported to be militarist, anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish.⁵⁰ During his studies Bashar joined the Ba'th party youth movement, and later became a regular

⁴² *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 11 June 2000, 16 June 2000, 6 July 2000, 12 July 2000; *al-Hayat*, 11 June 2000.

⁴³ Zisser, *Asad's legacy*, 158–60.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 174–75; Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem," 156; Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks: 1991–96 and Beyond* (Washington, D.C., 1999), 45.

⁴⁵ The interview was broadcast on Syrian television on 15 June 1998, and cited in Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1999), 187.

⁴⁶ Ghabdian, "The New Asad," 626–27.

⁴⁷ Interview with Bashar al-Asad, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 Feb. 2001.

⁴⁸ *Al-Safir*, 27 Mar. 2003.

⁴⁹ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 115.

⁵⁰ For studies dealing with the Syrian School Curriculum, see: Meyrav Wurmser, *The Schools of Ba'thism: A Study of Syrian Schoolbooks*. Washington D.C.: Middle East Media Research Institute, 2000; Arnon Groiss, *Jews, Zionism and Israel in Syrian School Textbooks*. New York: Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, 2001.

member of the Party. His medical studies were conducted at Damascus University, while his training as an ophthalmologist in London was interrupted after a short period of two years or less, by his brother Basil's death. Apparently most of Bashar's social contacts in London were Syrian emigrants, who sympathized with the Asad regime, among them his father-in-law to be, cardiologist Dr. Fawaz al-Akhras, who headed an organization of Syrian expatriates, and whose wife was a diplomat at the Syrian embassy.⁵¹ Bashar's view of human rights and freedom of expression was suggested in an interview to the London-based *al-Hayat* in October 1997, when he explained that while he recognized the importance of Syria joining the World Wide Web, he felt he should advise against uncontrolled surfing, which might be a threat to Syrian citizens' values.⁵² Following his father's explicit wish for his inheritor to stick to his values, Bashar presents himself as his father's pupil and faithful successor, both ideologically and in practice, not only in the Syrian public sphere, but also in interviews to the Western media.⁵³

It is plain to see from the above that Bashar al-Asad's antisemitic public statements are embedded ideologically in a creed he acquired under his father's regime. Such views have been expressed time and again in the Syrian public sphere by intellectuals, military officials, journalists, columnists, and high-ranking regime spokesmen, as well as in the education system. And while Bashar al-Asad is not known to have verbally abused Jews and Judaism since July 2001, he continued his father's line of harsh attacks on Israel. One assumes that Asad is aware of the international criticism against these statements, and it seems that the timing for his repeated antisemitic attacks in 2000–2001 were not chosen at random, but aimed to take advantage of the anti-Israeli, and even anti-Jewish atmosphere in the Arab and Muslim world, which reached one of its peaks at the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada. As a rule, Hafiz al-Asad acted not as one who means to shape public opinion in his country and in the Arab world, but as wishing to reflect and express it.⁵⁴ It can be similarly inferred that Bashar, too, tried to "ride the wave" in the Arab and Muslim world, and even outside of it, in order to earn credit and prestige with the public in Syria, and generally in Arab countries, as an heir worthy of his father. The Israeli air strike against a Syrian radar station in Lebanon on 16 April 2001 as a response to Hizballah attacks on Israel (a Lebanese organization working under Syrian auspices), caused Asad and officials in his government rage and frustration, wanting an option of direct Syrian military action (impossible at that time due to the weakness of the Syrian army and fear of a general clash with Israel).⁵⁵ These sentiments could be the catalyst that pushed Asad's antisemitic statements to such extremes during the Pope's visit, but it should be noted that the beginning of these statements had preceded the Israeli air force operation.

⁵¹ Richard Beeston, "Blair Attempts to Win Asad with London Summit," *The Times* (London), 29 Nov. 2002; Eyal Zisser, *In the Name of the Father: Bashar al-Asad's First Years in Power* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004), 31–35.

⁵² *Al-Hayat*, 12 Oct. 1997, cited in Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 183.

⁵³ See, e.g., interview with Bashar al-Asad in *Der Spiegel*, 9 July 2001, cited in *FBIS*, 9 July 2001.

⁵⁴ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 71–72, 120.

⁵⁵ *Haaretz*, 16 April 2001.

THE SYRIAN PUBLIC SPHERE UNDER BASHAR ASAD

Both before and after Bashar's own antisemitic statements, other verbal attacks against Jews and Judaism were heard in the Syrian public sphere under his rule. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's slander of the Arabs was compared to Hitler's Nazi ideology, and following Ariel Sharon's election as prime minister in March 2001, it was associated with the Israelis collectively.⁵⁶ Mustafa Tlas, told the London-based Arabic newspaper *al-Majalla*, on the eve of the Pope's visit to Syria in May 2001, that "the Israeli people is against peace, and is more extreme than the Nazis."⁵⁷ Dr. Nadia Khawast, a columnist in *Tishrin*, described a conference of the Association of Arab Writers in the same month. During the conference the participants watched a television debate in Qatar on the analogy of Zionism and Nazism, which they supported. In the same column Khawast also covered the renewed edition published in Damascus of a memoir by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the Palestinian leader infamous for his cooperation with the Nazis: Khawast described Husayni as one who recognized the dangers of Zionism in time, alongside its "deep connection with the Jewish religion."⁵⁸

A week after Khawast's piece, Dr. 'Adnan Sulayman published an article in *Tishrin*, reflecting the ideology which President Bashar al-Asad expressed in his March 2003 *al-Safir* interview. Sulayman argued that Israel is "an entity in constant crisis, inherently different than the other nations in the World, leaning on Zionist capital." According to him, in order to gather 40% of world Jewry in Israel, Israeli leaders needed the British Colonialist occupation of Palestine, the two world wars, the collapse of the USSR, and "waging dozens of wars against the Arabs." "Therefore, gathering the remaining Jews will surely require "World Wars III and IV, and more wars with the Arabs."⁵⁹

In September 2001, *Syria Times*, an English-language official gazette mainly communicating abroad the Syrian regime's position, published "Zionism Reproduces Nazism," a piece that claimed, among other things, that Israel was committing genocide in the occupied territories, and that "Sharon is embodying—if not actually representing—Hitlerism." To Ariel Sharon was attributed such statements as: "If I became prime minister, I would wipe out all Arabs, kill every newborn Palestinian baby and knife the abdomen of every woman who is pregnant from an Arab. Those dogs should not be close to the chosen people of God." Sharon, it was also claimed, had promised during his election campaign to commit genocide on the Arabs. Further on in the article, a comparison was drawn between Zionism and Nazism, and between the Israelis and the Nazis:

Going through what the Nazis did against the Jews would reach the clear conclusion that criminal acts of the Nazis are not different from those being carried out by the racist and Zionist Israelis. Like what the Nazi ideology was based on racial superiority, Zionism based its ideology on the "chosen people of

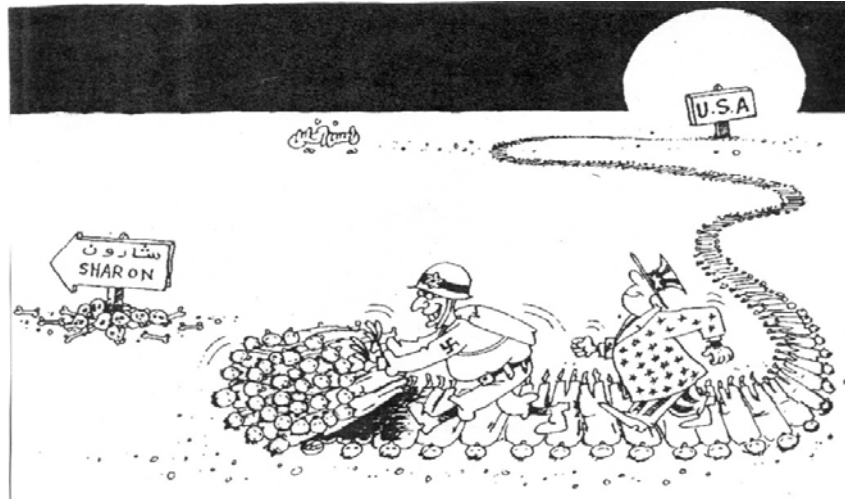
⁵⁶ *Tishrin* editorial, 8 April 2001; Brigadier General Dr. Sayyah 'Azzam, "Israel Continues Attempts to Judaize Arab Land," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, (Damascus), 1 Sept. 2000; see also 2nd Lt. Dr. Husayn Talal Muqlid, "The Geneva Convention and Israel's Violations of It," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Feb. 2002, where he argues that these violations indicate that Israel is, supposedly, "recreating Nazism."

⁵⁷ *Al-Majalla* (London), 6 May 2001.

⁵⁸ *Tishrin*, 21 May 2001.

⁵⁹ *Tishrin*, 28 May 2001.

God.” Both Nazism and Zionism represent two faces of the same coin as each derives its ideology from racism, genocide and terrorism. Both are strong advocates of racist killing and both deny basic rights of other peoples and openly disregard human principle.⁶⁰



Tishrin, 16-4-2002

Accusing Zionism of racism allegedly stemming from Judaism has persisted in the Syrian press during President Bashar al-Asad's reign. Syrian "experts" explained that Zionism is based on the Jewish faith, and that it is not Abraham's and Moses' religion, but a fabrication created during the Babylonian captivity, where, so they argued, the "racist notion" of the "Chosen People" originated. According to this attitude, it was this fundamental racism which turned Zionism into a racist, murderous entity.⁶¹ In this context, Israel has been constantly accused of Nazism.⁶² Israel was demonized in the same spirit in President Asad's address to the Beirut Arab League States' summit, on 28 March 2002:

"Israel" was founded in 1948 according to an international resolution, and was founded by killing, terrorism, and expanding, that is, it defined itself as an enemy state, and does not even try to present itself as an innocent state; so much so, that it announces to everyone that it is an enemy state that kills, occupies, and expands....⁶³

After the September 11, 2001 terror attack on the United States, it was claimed in the Syrian press that the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, was behind the attack or knew about it in advance and warned "4,000 Israelis" who worked at the World Trade Center in New York to stay away from work—a common claim within antisemitic circles, Arab or otherwise, of unclear origin.⁶⁴ More recently, Hasan al-Attar, a Syrian engineer, published an article in *Tishrin*, "Antisemitism is a Jewish-Zionist product" in response to articles by Minister Dr.

⁶⁰ *Syria Times* (Damascus), 5 Sept. 2001.

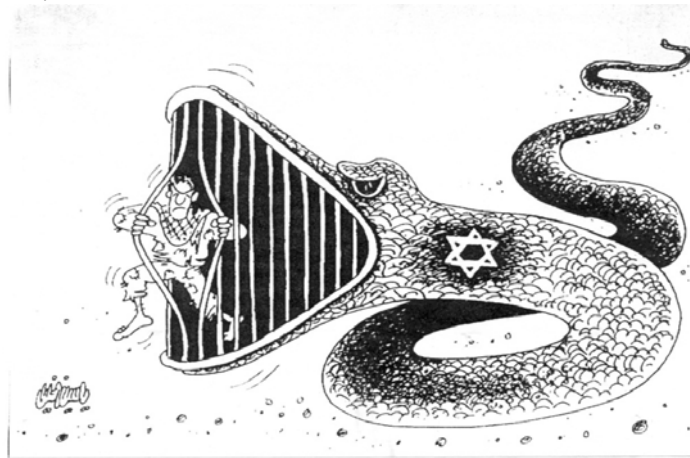
⁶¹ Bassam Muhanna, "The Hebrews-Israelis-Adherents of the Mosaic Faith-Jews," *Tishrin*, 23 June 2001; see also Nadia Khawast, "Yes, Zionism is Racist," *Tishrin*, 8 Aug. 2001.

⁶² See another example in *Tishrin*'s report of 16 Mar. 2002: "Turkish Circles Condemn Zionist Aggression: 'Israel' [sic] Implements Nazism."

⁶³ *Tishrin*, 28 Mar. 2002.

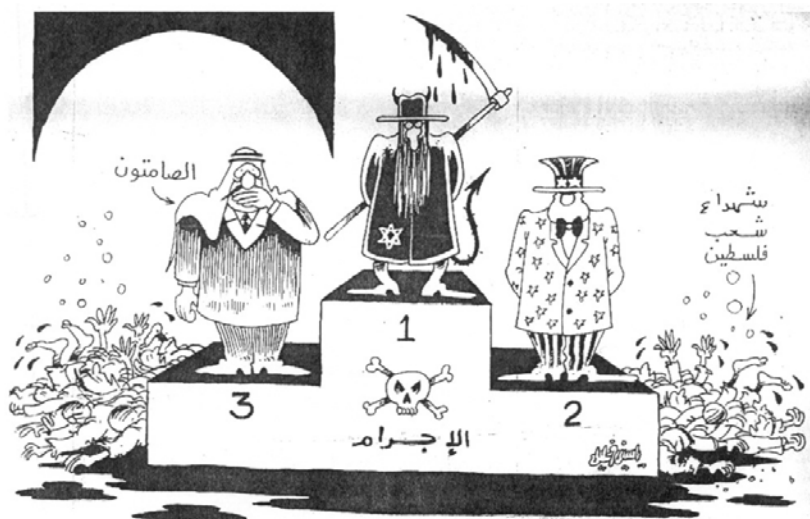
⁶⁴ "Terrorist Israel," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, Feb. 2002.

Buthayna Sha‘ban in which she equated between the persecution against the Jews in the past and “the present targeting of the Arabs, Islam and the Muslims.” Al-‘Attar referred a question to Sha‘ban: “Is it possible to equate between the Arab and Islamic position, with the conspiracies and plots around it, and the Jewish-Zionist imperialistic position, with its zeal, racism, corruptness and misanthropy....”⁶⁵ The same newspaper’s cultural section reported recently on a lecture given by researcher Humsi Farhan al-Hamada, in which he described the ideas of Zionist creed as “The Jews are God’s chosen people, the Israeli is considered by God higher than the angels, all the world is his possession and he is entitled to rule over it, as an equal to divine power. Palestine is the main object of the Jews, from which they govern the world. All the Jews in the world are one people, and all of them are members of the Israeli nationality.”⁶⁶



Tishrin, 2-4-2002

A Palestinian tries to break free.



Tishrin, 11-8-2001

The podium in the contest of crimes surrounded by the “martyrs of the Palestinian people.”

The Arabs, in third place, are “silent.”

⁶⁵ *Tishrin*, 12 Nov. 2006.

⁶⁶ “Terrorism in the Zionist creed,” *Tishrin*, 25 Feb. 2007.

Caricatures in the Syrian press have always tended to represent the general opinion, including antisemitic stereotypes. On the background of the al-Aqsa Intifada, a stereotypical image of the Israeli was offered, with repetitive antisemitic motifs: a monster, an ultra-Orthodox Jew or a soldier with a crooked nose, monstrous, cowardly, cruel, and homicidal, protected by America and controlling it, represented by a Star of David and a swastika.⁶⁷ The IDF entering Bethlehem in April 2002, and the siege of armed Palestinians who had barricaded themselves in the Church of the Nativity, were yet again covered as a repetition of the killing of Christ. *Tishrin* refer to it as the “re-killing and re-crucifying of Jesus Christ...who was a Palestinian refugee in his own homeland, in his own sanctuary, in his own church...,” and accompanied it with a caricature borrowed from Italian *La Stampa*, showing baby Jesus in the stable, faced with a tank inscribed with a Star of David, saying (in translation to Arabic): “will they kill me once again?”⁶⁸

The Army Gazette *Jaysh al-Sha‘b* too continued its usual attacks on Jews and Judaism.⁶⁹ Thus, for instance, Colonel Dr. Nawfal Hasan wrote in his article “Models of Behavior and Thought,” towards the end of 2002: “the Israeli media keep exposing that the Rabbis smuggle money to overseas banks, due to mistrust of Israel’s economic and political stability...or as a preparation to leave it” [the Israeli media did report people transferring money overseas, but these were wealthy citizens and business people, rather than Rabbis].⁷⁰

Recently Syrian officials and journalists have demonstrated the use of “Jewish” as a term of condemnation and derogation against their opponents: e.g., following an interview with former Vice President Khaddam on *Alarabiya* television station in December 2005, in which he severely criticized President Asad and blamed him for initiating the murder of former Lebanese PM Hariri, Syrian members of Parliament attacked *Alarabiya* [i.e., “the Arabic”], and called it “al-Yahudiyya” [“the Jewish”] and “al-‘Ibriyya” [“the Hebrew”].⁷¹ On other occasions, the Syrian media castigated Detlev Mehlis, the German former UN special investigator on the Hariri murder, as “son of a Jew.”⁷² As either vituperation or a new slander, like the allegations against Jews regarding 9/11 and the Lewinsky affair, this anecdote seems to accurately demonstrate the current trends in the Syrian regime towards Jews and Judaism. On another recent occasion, *Tishrin*’s cultural section reported on a lecture given by literature and poetry critic Hanna ‘Abud, a Christian. In his lecture, ‘Abud “acquitted” American poet Ezra Pound [a known antisemite.] from “the guilt of being a Jew”, attributed to him by an Arab writer. According to ‘Abud, Pound’s “poetry, ideas, and speeches have an aesthetic and humane non-materialistic orientation, and that is the greatest proof for his non-Jewishness.”⁷³

⁶⁷ See, e.g., *Tishrin*, 31 May 2000, 19 May 2001, 11 Aug. 2001, 18 Apr. 2002.

⁶⁸ Ahmad Sawwan, “For Whom the Bell Tolls? Bethlehem [caught] in the Circle of Fire and Siege,” *Tishrin*, 11 Apr. 2002.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., “author and scholar” Mahmud ‘Abd al-Rahman, “Shedding Light on the Racist Attitudes in the Israeli School Curricula,” *Jaysh al-Sha‘b*, 1 Sept. 2002

⁷⁰ *Jaysh al-Sha‘b*, 1 Dec. 2002.

⁷¹ www.alarabiya.net/Articles/2005/12/31/19936.htm

⁷² See English internet edition of *Der Spiegel*, 19 Dec. 2005, www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,391437,00.html

⁷³ *Tishrin*, 26 Feb. 2007.

A relatively new phenomenon, perhaps, is Iranian Khomeinist influence on Ba'athist secular Syria. Hafiz al-Asad had an alliance of shared interests and cooperation with Iran from 1979. When Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father, the character of the relationship changed. Rather than an alliance of equals, the more populous and resourceful Iran has become the patron, and Syria the client. Iran, with its ambitions of regional hegemony and pursuit of nuclear weapons, is now offering sponsorship and protection for the smaller and weaker Syria, who feels threatened by the United States, Israel, its rivals in Lebanon, and even France.⁷⁴ In June 2006, Syria signed a defense pact with Iran. An Iranian opposition journalist (based abroad) recently expressed the view that Iran's influence in Syria has grown so deep that Shi'ite Iranian clerics are converting Syrian Sunnis and 'Alawites to Shi'ism *en masse*. According to that source, in the last year two *ayatollahs* of Iran again declared the 'Alawites to be genuine Muslims (following the acknowledgment formerly gained by Hafiz al-Asad from Lebanese Shi'ite clerics), and even authorized "theological exchanges" with them, paving the road for attempts at conversion.⁷⁵ However, this last development may be interpreted as Asad and the 'Alawite sect resorting again to the practice of the "taqiyya," as mentioned above, used by heterodox sect members to publicly observe the orthodox Sunni cult. This time, perhaps, the 'Alawites are using the practice to conform with Iran, the rising regional power, who seeks to foster its relations with Shi'ite communities throughout the region. Indeed, some Syrian spokesmen stated that an alliance between Syria and Iran, "the odd couple," is not insoluble, and that Damascus has been pushed into Tehran's arms from a lack of choice, as a result of U.S. policy.⁷⁶

In this context, one may appreciate Bashar al-Asad's recent statements about the Holocaust, in an interview that was aimed at improving his image in American public opinion, aired on PBS on 27 March 2006. In the hour-long interview with journalist Charlie Rose (a Jew), we find the following:

Rose: The new President of Iran visited you here and you visited him in Tehran.

What do you make of a man who says there was no Holocaust?

Asad: If you ask many people in the region they would say to you that the West exaggerated the Holocaust. People say there was a Holocaust, but they exaggerated it.

Rose: You don't believe that though, do you?

Asad: It's not a matter of how many were killed, half a million, six million or one person. Killing is killing. For example, eight million Soviets were killed, so why don't we talk about them? The problem is not the number of those killed but rather how they use the Holocaust. What do the Palestinians have to do with the Holocaust to pay the price?

⁷⁴ Itamar Rabinovich, "Courting Syria," *Haaretz*, 23 Nov. 2006.

⁷⁵ Amir Taheri, "The 'Iranization' of Syria," *Jerusalem Post*, 2 Nov. 2006. Taheri claims also that the Syrian regime was purged of Sunni elements, opposed to Iranian Shi'ism, and those elements, in turn, formed an alliance with the Syrian Muslim brotherhood; he probably refers to former vice-president Khaddam and his faction, who came close to 'Ali Sadr al-Din Bayanuni, the London-based leader of the Syrian Muslim brotherhood. However, this claim seems exaggerated, since other Sunnis like Vice-president Faruq al-Shara' and Foreign Minister Walid Mu'atlim continue to play a prominent role in the regime. Even the first lady, Asma al-Asad, is a Sunni, as mentioned above.

⁷⁶ Rabinovich, "Courting Syria."

Rose: Even people that I know in Iran say they don't believe what the President is saying. There are people who believe it...

Asad: In my country you'd see two opinions as well.

Rose: I want to make sure I understand what you believe. You believe there was a Holocaust where the anti-Semite Nazis killed millions....

Asad: We, Arabs, are Semitic too. Definitely there were massacres that happened against the Jews during the Second World War, but I'm talking about the concept and how they use it. But I don't have any clue how many were killed or how they were killed, by gas, by shooting...we don't know.

Rose: Part of the Nazi policy was to exterminate the Jews. This is not just a massacre.

Asad: We see what's going on in Palestine the same way, but you don't see it the same way. During the Second World War we didn't live in Europe; we were far [away] and we don't see it the way the Europeans see it. What happens in Palestine affects us directly, yet you do not see it the same way we see it. Six million Palestinians are outside their country and other tens or hundreds of thousands were killed in the last decades.⁷⁷

In an even more recent interview to the Italian *La Repubblica*, in which Asad called on Israel to resume peace negotiations, he repeated his doubts about the Holocaust. When asked about the Holocaust deniers conference held in Teheran, the Syrian president replied: "Europe has a complex with the Holocaust. We don't have, we didn't perpetrate it," and claimed that it was a matter of freedom of expression, equating it with the popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code* and Holocaust denial: "Is it possible to discuss about Christ, and not on the Holocaust? This is not a story of God, it is a story of human beings."⁷⁸

Asad, who generally refrained from antisemitic statements since the scandal following his speech during the Pope's visit to Damascus in 2001, might have been indeed influenced by Ahmadinejad's Holocaust-denying rhetoric. But, as mentioned above, Holocaust denial is not new to the Asad regimes: in fact, even during the last years, and before Ahmadinejad was elected as president, the Syrian press continued to publish Holocaust-denying pieces.⁷⁹ Whether Bashar al-Asad truly believes in his allegations on the Holocaust (which indeed are very common in the Arab and Islamic World), or merely tried to stand by his ally, this is more evidence showing how much such perceptions are embedded in the creed of the Syrian regime.

⁷⁷ For the full interview see the web site of the Syrian Arab News Agency: www.sana.org

⁷⁸ *La Repubblica* (Rome), 15 Dec. 2006.

⁷⁹ See, e.g., Dr. Rif'at Sayd Ahmad, "The Truth on the 'Holocaust' [*sic*]—The Proof to the False Burning of the Jews in the Nazis' Crematoriums," *Tishrin*, 9 May 2004; Ghassan Mahfud, a letter to the editorial board, *Tishrin*, 9 June 2004.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of its components reveals Syrian antisemitism to be a branch of modern Arab antisemitism, which has evolved mainly in the course of the conflict with Israel. As historian Yehoshaphat Harkabi has shown, it originates in the early Islamic tradition, which perceived the Jews as low and despised, and also as cunning, treacherous, and conniving in their struggle with the Prophet Muhammad. While these stereotypes were dormant in various periods, modern Arab antisemitism has employed them to give Judeophobia an Arab-Islamic coloring.⁸⁰ Although Syria is a relatively secular state, whose president is an 'Alawi (the Sunni fundamentalists' greatest foe), the Islamic traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes of treacherousness and conspiracy have been reflected in the Syrian government's attitude to Israel during the peace negotiations. On the other hand, like many other Arab countries, Syria's antisemitism, too, was mainly influenced by the European Christian prejudice which entered the Arab world starting from the 19th century. As in other Arab countries, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and their derived anti-Jewish images are widespread in Syria. The Zionist movement and Israel are viewed as part of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world.⁸¹ The image of the Jews as inherently blameworthy, as abnormal and naturally misanthropic, was crystallized back in the 1950s and 1960s, along with attacks on the notion of the "chosen people."⁸² Syrian antisemitism was also inspired by the USSR and Communist Bloc, which Syria looked up to as a model until their collapse.⁸³ Indeed, many Syrian publicists who censured Jews and Judaism referred to Soviet publications among their major sources. Historian Bernard Lewis suggested that the comparison of Israel and the Nazis, which is quite common in the Arab world and in Syria, originated in Soviet propaganda.⁸⁴ Yet Western European Holocaust denial was also warmly embraced by the Arab world in general, and Syria in particular. Likewise, a perceived fusion of identity between Israel and the Zionist movement, and Judaism and the Jewish people has also taken root in Syria.

Is antisemitism prevalent not only among the circles of the regime, but also among the Syrian general public? The Syrian regime seems to put a great effort into spreading antisemitism using the media and education system, but in a totalitarian state it is difficult to assess what public opinion really is. There is a small number of positive cases. Despite the abysmal hostility towards Israel, Jews, and Judaism displayed by the Damascus-based Arab Writers Association, certain prominent Syrian writers and intellectuals—such as the poet Adonis ('Ali Ahmad Sa'id), the academic Hani al-Rahib, and the playwright Sa'dallah Wanus—have called for a dialogue with Israel. Some have done so even while residing in Syria.⁸⁵ Anthropologist Lisa Wedeen, who conducted a field study in Syria, recorded among other things a popular cycle of jokes about the regime and the president, some describing

⁸⁰ Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, 218–23, 226; cf. Milson, "What is Arab Antisemitism (in Hebrew).

⁸¹ Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, 212.

⁸² Ibid., 226–32.

⁸³ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 47.

⁸⁴ Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1986), 160–61.

⁸⁵ See Ajami, *The Dream Palace*, 253–55.

Syrian soldiers meeting Israeli ones on the mutual border; almost surprisingly, the Israeli soldier described in these jokes is a human, non-threatening figure.⁸⁶

Bernard Lewis estimated in 1987 that Islamic-Arab antisemitism was not yet endemic. Despite his concern that it could happen soon, he believed that antisemitism was still dictated from top-down, more than being a bottom-up phenomenon originating in society itself.⁸⁷ In the current wave of Arab and Islamic antisemitism, perhaps Lewis's fear is becoming a reality. Bashar al-Asad's antisemitic public statements could mean policy dictated from above, but they may stem from genuine views held by the Syrian leader. On the other hand, despite what is known of him, one cannot confidently predict Asad's future development. Bashar al-Asad's repeated calls for negotiations with Israel (from the end of 2003 to the present—although combined with threats of war, since the 2006 Lebanon War), may hint at a potential turning point, similar to his father's taking the diplomatic track, or even to a major shift like that made by Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1977.⁸⁸ In his recent interview with *La Repubblica*, in which he supported the Holocaust denying conference in Iran, Asad was asked whether Israel is his eternal enemy, and replied: "Syria and Israel may live side by side in peace and harmony."⁸⁹ Such a shift might, indeed, lead to change in attitudes toward Jews and Judaism expressed by the regime; Time will tell if it is unrealistic to expect that Hafiz al-Asad's successor son might follow in the footsteps of Sadat.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 124.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 258–59.

⁸⁸ There were different responses among Israeli politicians, intelligence officers, and pundits regarding Asad's calls to resume the negotiations. One view, among its adherents former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, current Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and head of Mossad Meir Dagan, doubted Asad's sincerity and claimed that he is merely trying to avoid American and international pressures. Others, among them the IDF intelligence branch, suggested that Syria is indeed seeking peace, and that Israel should negotiate with the Syrians, at least to find out what their intentions truly are. See, e.g., *Haaretz* 13.1.2004, 14.1.2004, 7.12.2006, 18.12.2006, 26.12.2006; cf. Eyal Zisser, "Asad—a part of the problem, a part of the solution" (in Hebrew), 27 Nov. 2006, www.ynet.co.il

⁸⁹ *La Repubblica*, 15 Dec. 2006.

⁹⁰ Bernard Lewis named Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat as an example of an Arab leader whose opinions changed from one extreme to the other. He illustrated a zigzagging sometimes characteristic of Middle Eastern leaders. On Sadat, who also expressed antisemitic views before he became devoted to peace, see Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 161, 259; cf. Ma'oz, "The Image of the Jew in Official Arab Literature," 20–21.