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FABRICATING AN EMOTION

What is commonly called the Oriental imagination has long been recognized. It is only in our day, however, that it has played a striking part in shaping world events. The amplifying effects of modern communications media - Internet, 24-hour cable news - and the willing involvement of powerful world interests have presented the Oriental imagination with unprecedented influence.

The use of lies in our time as a primary weapon of state policy by the two most powerful totalitarian states the world has known - Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union - did, moreover, set an example. It also introduced techniques whose application sharpened the Oriental imagination into a highly effective political weapon.

Al-Ghazzali, the great 11th-century Muslim theologian, wrote: 'Know that a lie is not haram [wrong] in itself, but only because the evil conclusions to which it leads the hearer, making him believe something that is not really the case' If a lie is the only way of obtaining a good result, it is permissible.' We must lie when truth leads to unpleasant results.'

Thus the most startling item in the Arabs' propaganda is their usurpation of the Jewish patrimony of Jerusalem. Arab political propaganda claims that Jerusalem is an 'Arab city,' has been an Arab city for many centuries, and is a holy city in Islam. There is only one small grain of truth in this claim, which on the whole is as false as the quite common description of Palestine as 'a land holy to three faiths.'

IT IS POSSIBLE to call Palestine a land holy to two faiths: to Christianity as well as to Judaism. It was certainly never holy to Islam. Muhammed no doubt turns in his grave at the ignorant suggestion that Islam has a 'holy land,' or a holy site of any degree other than Arabia. Palestine has no significance in the Muslim religion. It never existed as a country under Arab or any of the other Muslim administrations.

Jerusalem does contain a site regarded as holy to Islam (and this too was borrowed from Judaism), but the city as such has no significance in Islam. While Jerusalem is the centerpiece of the Jewish tradition, and dominates the narrative of Christianity, Jerusalem is not mentioned even once in the Muslim Koran.

The known facts are fascinatingly simple. Muhammad, in establishing Islam in Arabia more than six centuries into the Christian era, hoped that both Jews and Christians would adopt the new religion. He called on them to accept him as the successor of both Moses and Jesus, whose original authority and sanctity he respected. To emphasize an affinity and religious continuity between the two older religions and Islam, he at first ordered that when praying, the Muslim should adopt the Jew's custom of turning his face to Jerusalem (at that time still under Christian rule). When, however, there was no response by Christians or Jews to his claim or to his appeal, he rescinded the order 18 months later. Muslims at prayer have ever since turned their faces to Mecca.

IT WAS presumably the recognition by Muhammad of the sanctity of the Holy City of Judaism that gave birth to the Muslim tradition, conveniently borrowed by his successors, that the Temple area was the site of his ascent to the seventh heaven. The Koran itself relates that Muhammad in a single night was transported to heaven by Burak,

a horse with wings, a woman's face, and a peacock's tail. He was first taken to what the Koran called the 'uttermost mosque' - il masjid al akxa.

Jerusalem is not mentioned in the story, and there was, of course, no mosque in Jerusalem. After Muhammad's death, the tradition - which did not pass unchallenged by an opposing school of thought - laid it down that the 'uttermost mosque' meant the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

On this legend rests the Muslim claim to the Jewish Temple Mount as a Muslim holy place. The Dome of the Rock and the Al Akxa Mosque were subsequently built on the Mount. This, called Haram-a-Sharif, became the third holiest place in Islam (after Mecca and Medina).

It is not known that Muhammad in fact ever set foot in Jerusalem. Here begins and ends the religious significance of Jerusalem to Islam. It is fascinating to reflect what the Christian reaction would be if the Muslim theologians had chosen to declare the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the station for Muhammad's ascent, then renamed it Burak, and claimed the site as Muslim property.

British historian Christopher Sykes has put it pithily: 'To the Muslims it is not Jerusalem, but a certain site in Jerusalem which is venerated... the majestic Dome of the Rock. To a Muslim there is a profound difference between Jerusalem and Mecca and Medina. The latter are holy places containing holy sites. Apart from the hallowed rock, Jerusalem has no major Islamic significance.'

NOR WERE the Muslims overly impressed with Jerusalem's importance when they ruled in Palestine. When, on the fall of the city to the Crusaders in 1099, a Muslim delegation arrived in Baghdad, then the capital of the empire, to seek aid against the invading Christians, the Baghdadis shed tears and expressed sympathy, but offered and took no action to help in the recovery of Jerusalem. The city never played any part in the Arabs' political life.

While, in turn, Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo glittered with the luster of an imperial capital, Jerusalem stagnated as a remote provincial townlet. It never served even as a provincial capital, not even a subprovincial capital (an honor reserved for Ramle). No less significantly, it was never a Muslim cultural center. No great school of Islamic lore was established, nor any religious message proclaimed there.

To the Muslims, Jerusalem, though the site of a Holy Place, was a backwater.

IT IS not irrelevant to recall that Jordan, after its illegal occupation, never even suggested that here was a great opportunity to give expression to the alleged Muslim passion for Jerusalem by establishing a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. No less telling is the fact that throughout the 19 years of Jordan's Muslim control of Jerusalem not a single one of the globe-trotting Saudi princes ever set foot in Jerusalem. Nor did the Arabs attach any importance to living in Jerusalem. Even when the Muslims ruled, for long periods the majority of the population was Christian. After the middle of the 19th century, soon after modern Jewish reconstruction began, the Jews attained a majority, which they have never relinquished.

Successive Arab attacks, encouraged or permitted by the British, from 1920 onward, gradually squeezed the majority of the Jews out of the Old City and into the new. In 1948, when their ammunition ran out, the final remnant and the handful of defenders surrendered to the Jordanians. That was when the city was divided.

THE ARABS' slight and superficial relationship to the city has only recently been expanded into a claim of an uncompromising, even exclusive, ownership. Just as they originally borrowed the sanctity of the Jewish holy place, they have now, in our generation, tried to simulate something of the unique and mystic passion of the Jewish people for their ancient and incomparable Holy City.

In the war of 1948, Abdallah's Arab League, under British guidance, captured the eastern part of Jerusalem, including the Old City. The one significant change in the subsequent 19 years of Jordanian rule was the attempt to obliterate the Jewish presence and the signs of Jewish identity. All the synagogues were destroyed.

In the ruins of the most famous of them - the hurva - an enterprising Arab citizen put together a small stable for his ass or his goat. The ancient Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Old City, was torn up, some of its tombstones being used for paving and some for lavatory seats in Jordanian army camps.

The Arabs avoided hurting any Christian susceptibilities and, as a result, the many Christian witnesses in the Old City kept silent about acts of desecration and destruction perpetrated against Jewish sites. Then, suddenly for the first time in history, the Arabs discovered and revealed to the world the vehement, passionate, almost desperate accents of a deep-rooted, long-standing and undying attachment to Jerusalem.

THIS FABRICATION of an emotion which can, after all, so easily and manifestly be exposed, has - because of the very intensity of its presentation - made a significant impression throughout the world.

But it may be helpful in demonstrating a national characteristic of the Arabs, which has assumed central importance in the confrontation between the Jewish and Arab peoples: the admitted capacity of the Arabs to manufacture facts, to deceive themselves into accepting them, and to work themselves up into a public passion over what is in fact a nonexistent emotion.

'What a people believes,' writes modern Arab historian Philip Hitti about the Arabs, 'even if untrue, has the same influence over the lives as if it were true.'

For it is a well-known part of the character of Arab fantasy that the inventor of a story comes to believe it himself.

A charming little tale from Arab folklore tells of a man whose afternoon nap was disturbed by the noise of children playing in the courtyard below. He went out to the balcony and called, 'Children, how foolish you are! While you are playing here, they are giving away figs in the marketplace.'

The children rushed off to collect their figs, and the man, pleased with his invention, went back to his couch. But just as he was about to drop off, a troublesome thought aroused him: 'Here I am, lying around, when there are free figs to be had in the marketplace!'