



WHAT'S HOLDING THE ARAB WORLD BACK?

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In the judo competition of the 2016 Olympics in Brazil, an Israeli heavyweight judo fighter named Or Sasson defeated his Egyptian opponent, Islam El Shehaby, in a first-round match. The Egyptian then refused to shake the Israeli's extended hand, earning boos from the crowd.

If you want the short answer for why the Arab world is sliding into the abyss, look no further than this little incident. It illustrates how hatred of Israel and Jews corrupts every element of Arab society.

You won't find this explanation for the Arab world's decline among journalists and academics. They reflexively blame the usual suspects: the legacy of colonialism, unemployed youth, the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide, and every other politically correct excuse they can think of. For them, hatred of Israel is treated like sand in Arabia – just part of the landscape.

Yet the fact remains that over the past 70 years the Arab world expelled virtually all of its Jews, some 900,000 people, while holding on to its hatred of them. Over time the result proved fatal: a combination of lost human capital, expensive wars against Israel, and an intellectual life perverted by conspiracy theories and a perpetual search for scapegoats. The Arab world's problems are a problem of the Arab mindset, and the name of that problem is anti-Semitism.

As a historical phenomenon, this is not unique. Historian Paul Johnson has noted that wherever anti-Semitism took hold, social and political decline almost inevitably followed. Just a few examples:

Spain expelled its Jews in 1492. The effect, Johnson noted, “was to deprive Spain (and its colonies) of a class already notable for the astute handling of finance.”

In czarist Russia, the adoption of numerous anti-Semitic laws ultimately weakened and corrupted the entire Russian government. These laws also led to mass Jewish emigration, resulting in a breathtaking loss of intellectual and human capital.

Germany might well have won the race for an atomic bomb if Hitler hadn't sent Jewish scientists like Albert Einstein and Edward Teller into exile in the U.S.

These patterns were replicated in the Arab world. Contrary to myth, the cause was not the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. There were bloody anti-Jewish pogroms in Palestine in 1929, Iraq in 1941, and Libya in 1945.

Nor is it accurate to blame Israel for fueling anti-Semitism by refusing to trade land for peace.

Among Egyptians, hatred of Israel barely abated after Prime Minister Menachem Begin returned the entire Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. And among Palestinians, anti-Semitism became markedly worse during the years of the Oslo peace process.

Johnson calls anti-Semitism a “highly infectious” disease capable of overwhelming intellectuals and simpletons alike. Its potency, he noted, lies in transforming a personal and instinctive irrationalism into a political and systematic one. For the Jew-hater, every crime has the same culprit and every problem has the same solution. Anti-Semitism makes the world seem simple. In doing so, it condemns the anti-Semite to a permanent darkness.

Today there is no great university in the Arab world, no serious scientific research, a stunted literary culture. In 2015 the U.S. Patent Office reported 3,804 patents from Israel, as compared with 30 from Egypt, the largest Arab country. Hatred of Israel and Jews has also deprived the Arab world of both the resources and the example of its neighbor. Israel quietly supplies water to Jordan, helping to ease the burden of Syrian refugees, and quietly provides surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to Egypt to fight ISIS in the Sinai. But this is largely unknown among Arabs, for whom the only permissible image of Israel is an Israeli soldier in riot gear, abusing a Palestinian. Successful nations make a point of trying to learn from their neighbors. The Arab world has been taught over generations only to hate theirs.

This may be starting to change. Recently, the Arab world has been forced to face up to its own failings in ways it cannot easily blame on Israel. The change can be seen in the budding rapprochement between Jerusalem and Cairo, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

But that’s not enough. So long as an Arab athlete can’t pay his Israeli opposite the courtesy of a handshake, the disease of the Arab mind and the misfortunes of its world will continue.

For Israel, this is a pity.

For the Arabs, it’s a calamity.

I’m Bret Stephens.