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OTTOMAN-SEPHARDI COOPERATION AS A MODEL FOR  
CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM-JEWISH RELATIONS

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## Introduction

The quincennial anniversary, which fell in an era of increasing conflict between contemporary Muslims and Jews, provided us with an opportunity to commemorate that year, 1992, and honor the Muslims who gave the Sephardim refuge in both North Africa and in the Ottoman Empire. Jewish-Muslim relations have continued to deteriorate in the contemporary period. However, the early Sephardi-Ottoman experience is well-documented in the literature — from Rabbi Eliahu Capsali's historical accounts written in the 16th century to Sanford Shaw's work, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* written at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which is “dedicated to Muslim and Jewish Turks ... in celebration of five hundred years of brotherhood and friendship.”

It is the ideological source and inspiration for this refuge — the Qu'ran — which I would like to explore here. It is vital for us to remember that when Sephardim faced expulsion and extinction, it was the Muslims, abiding strictly by Islamic Law, who came to their aid. That there were political and economic advantages to this generous hospitality is also well documented and self-evident. Why should religious tolerance not be accompanied with prosperity? Apart from the economic gain in trade and in rebuilding Istanbul, apart from the political slap in the face at his Spanish rivals, Sultan Beyazid II -- who decreed the Ottoman Empire a refuge for the Jews (*on the pain of death to those who would not comply*) — is consistently described as a devout Muslim and a stickler for the finer points of Islamic law.

What concerns me here, given contemporary views of Islam by the West, is the following question: What is there in the Qur'an and in Islamic Law, which led to the display of aid to the Jews of Spain? And how can this understanding of Islam be used to bring about mutual tolerance and cooperation, or at least interfaith dialogue, today? This question is a challenge to Western views of Islam, which, in the last decades of the 20th century have branded the religion received by the Prophet Muhammad as intolerant, rigid, fundamentalist, isolationist, inflexible, and above all, as hostile to Jews, Zionism, and Western influence. Ironically, medieval Islam has been characterized by scholars as just the reverse, that is, tolerant, flexible, open to Western ideology (particularly Greek philosophy) and supportive of non-Muslim Peoples of the Book.

My question is also a challenge to some of our Muslim cousins who have claimed that Islam teaches them a literal form of external *jihad* which allows them to seek the death of those outside the Dar El-Islam. The task (in twenty minutes?) is to seek the answers within the holy book of Islam, that book which is considered by Muslims to be the literal word of God, (received in God's own language), as well as the unbendable law — to be adhered to not just by Muslims, but by all of the peoples of the world.

## Parallels and Contrasts between Ottoman Ascendancy and Spanish Reconquest

I will begin by enumerating a number of parallels which can be observed in the Ottoman ascendancy and the Spanish reconquista. First, Islam was more than a system of religious belief or code of personal behavior; it was a political system with a specified body of law.

Catholicism, as interpreted by the Spanish monarchy, also provided more than a system of personal faith and code of behavior; it entered into the political arena.

Second, both saw themselves as returning to an older tradition: the Ottoman Turks saw themselves as liberating their land from Byzantine Christians and returning it to Islamic rule. So too, the 1492 Spanish defeat of the Moors in Granada brought about *reconquest* and a return to Christian rule.

Third, both empires were politically expansionist, and sought to revitalize the internal economy through increased international trade. Fourth, both inherited and uneasy pluralism in which religious, ethnic, and regional rivalries prevailed. Fifth, in both cases, this rivalry tended to be between Christian communities of different ethnic regions or denominations — or between Christians and Muslims.

Last and most important for our consideration: Upon coming to power, both Spanish and Ottoman rulers applied their own strict religious values, ethics and law to *all* their subjects, whether or not they were followers of the dominant faith.

The faiths, however, differed markedly in their approach to minority religious populations with their midst. The Catholic monarchy sought unification through dismantling the pluralism of Islamic Spain. The choice of conversion to Catholicism or expulsion from Spain for Iberian Jews and Muslims is well known to you. The Ottoman offer of refuge is less well known in the West.

The Ottoman Turks were building an Islamic society where a Christian one had stood. The Spanish were doing exactly the reverse. During this period of hegemonic struggle between Christianity and Islam, Anatolian Jews had found themselves infinitely better off under the Ottomans than they had been under Byzantine rule, and the Sephardim found that one of the few means of escaping Christian oppression in Spain was to return to the authority of another Islamic State.

## The Islamic State

What, then, is the nature of Islam and the Islamic State? What is the place of minority religious communities with the State? And why is the rebuilding of the Islamic State such a fearsome thought in contemporary Western society?

The key idea which distinguished Islam from medieval Catholicism, is that according to the Qur'an -- the literal word of God -- "there is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an, ii:256). It is assumed that you cannot force an individual (let alone an entire religious community) to convert to a new system of belief. According to the Qur'an, God himself has created the diversity found in the world. Differences of religion, race, ethnicity, and gender all are considered to be part of God's plan. Religious communities are expected to practice their own tradition *faithfully* -- that is, according to Islamic law, Jews must adhere carefully to the laws brought to them by Moses; Christians must follow the word of Christ.

It is the function of the Islamic State to enforce God's commandments by providing a society in which all believers in The One God can fulfill their own religious obligations.

Their blood is as our blood and their possessions as ours  
Hadith/ Ibn Qudama (pp 271-2)

and

To each among you we have prescribed a Law and an Open  
Way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single  
People, but His Plan is to test you in what he has given you  
So strive as in a race in all virtues  
The goal of you all is God Qur'an (v:259)

In contrast, the Catholic attitude toward the Jews in Spain at the time was that Christ himself had abandoned the religion, and thus, that all good Christians should purge themselves of the pollution of the Jews (C. Roth):

Their adherence to their ancestral religion is an affront  
to Christianity, Christians, and to Jesus Christ Himself.  
(C. Roth, The Inquisition)

Under the Islamic State, those with no faith in The One God are not to be tolerated. Polytheists, goddess worshippers, and pagan Arabs are compelled to enter into Islam. However, those who already adhere to The One —” El, Elohim, Allah — the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are considered to be the People of the Book ('Ahl Al-Kitab) and welcome to reside within the Islamic State as long as they maintain their own traditions diligently and respect the religion of their Muslim hosts. The Qur'an is clear in its lack of tolerance of paganism or unbelief among Arabs just as it is clear in its abhorrence of a false display of religiosity in any religion.

According to the Qur'an, the People of the Book are guaranteed their place in Paradise because of the covenants God had already made with them. They cannot be forced to accept the last revelation brought by God — which corrects the errors which over time had crept into their own holy books — nor can they be forced to adhere to Islamic practice. They can, however be compelled to practice the Law according to their own sacred texts.

The relationship between the Dar El Islam (Islamic State) and the Ahl El Kitab (People of the Book) is formalized in binding contracts, such as in the Pact of Omar. The contract, is written from the perspective of the Dhimmi (Protected Peoples under Islam) and is quite clear regarding the obligations of each community. It begins as follows,

"When you came against us, we asked you for safe conduct (*aman*)  
for ourselves, for our descendants, our property, and the people of  
our community  
and we undertook the following obligations to you:

(Examples follow)

We shall not build in our cities new monasteries, churches, convents or monks quarters,

Nor shall we repair those that fall into ruin

We shall not teach the Qur'an to our children

We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it

We shall show respect to Muslims [and] shall not seek to imitate Muslims, or their garments, turbans, or hair

We shall rise from our seats when a Muslim enters

We shall not speak as Muslims do

We shall not mount a saddle

We shall not bear arms

We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals

We shall not sell fermented drinks [to Muslims]

We shall always dress the same way wherever we may be

We will not display our crosses publicly

We shall not raise our voices in services

We shall not take slaves allotted to Muslims

We shall not build houses overtopping Muslim houses

We accept these conditions for ourselves and our people and in return receive safe conduct.

If we violate these terms, we forfeit the covenant [dhimmi] and are liable to the penalties accorded.

(Each of these actually requires a great deal of discussion).

The Pact of Omar is particularly interesting, since it was formulated in a period which attempted to promote conversion to Islam without going against the Qur'anic injunction against forced conversion.

The Qur'an was quite clear regarding the direction of Islamic animosity and when it should cease:

Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day [Judgement]  
Nor hold that forbidden that has been forbidden by God and his Apostle  
Nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth  
(Even if they are) People of the Book,  
*until they pay jizye* with willing submission  
and feel themselves subdued.

Qur'an (ix:29) my emphasis

Non-Muslims are to be tolerated within the Islamic State if they are not hostile to Islam and if they pay the jizye poll tax on able-bodied male heads of the household. They would agree to be respectful of Muslims, maintain their own traditional religion, language, custom and dress, and not interfere with the religious practices of Muslims by proselytizing or selling them things forbidden to Muslims.

In exchange, the Dhimmi maintained their own sacred places, neighborhoods, schools, religious courts, and customary professions. They were each endogamous, for the most part. Under the Islamic State, each community retains relative autonomy. The Qur'an tells Muslims to say to others:

Lakum dinukum  
W'ali dini

To you your religion  
And to me, mine

Qur'an (cix:6)

or, a stronger rendition is as follows,

O, ye who Believe!  
Take not the Jews and Christians  
for your friends and protectors!

Qur'an (v:51)

The Qur'an means this literally:

The Islamic State does not condone assimilation. Instead it promotes a kind of 'separate development,' a religious (rather than a racial) apartheid. In this way each community is expected to 'strive, as in a race, in all virtues' in their own way and for their own purpose — as long as they remain loyal to the larger State.

## Islamic Views of the 'Ahl Al Kitab

From the Islamic point of view, the New Testament is simply not the word of God. There are simply too many gospels, and they disagree on too many points. The New Testament, therefore, gives an inaccurate account of the birth, life, and death of Christ. The most important points clarified in the Qur'an include 1) that Jesus cannot be the son of God because of the very nature of God (although the Qur'an accepts the Virgin Birth as a miracle of God), and 2) that Jesus did not die on the cross, nor was he resurrected. God's justice would not allow for the crucifixion of the messiah. The Qur'an teaches that Judas was crucified in his place, Jesus went into occultation, and the living Christ will return as the Messiah. The fact that Muslims accept Christ

as the Messiah and await the Second Coming is, for some reason, a great surprise to contemporary Christians in the West.

The Qur'an corrects and supersedes the Torah as well. The Torah is considered to be the word of God, which has become polluted through human intervention for political reasons. The most important of these, of course, is the treatment of the Story of Abraham, particularly the Akedah, or the Binding of Isaac. This problem, which is well beyond the scope of the present paper, is entrenched in the Islamic psyche through the annual ritual reenactment of the substitution of a ram for the binding of Abraham's only son (considered by Muslims to be Ismail rather than Isaac) during Eid El Qurban, the Feast of the Sacrifice.

These misdeeds, and others, are neither wholly forgotten nor forgiven, but God is merciful will not break covenant with his Peoples. The misdeeds of the Children of Israel with their Golden Calf when Moses is bringing them God's Law, is, for example, a theme to which the Qur'an returns repeatedly. Flawed as they may be, the People of the Book are allowed into both the Kingdom of Heaven and the Islamic State.

Thus, it can be understood that Jews and Christians have strayed from their own paths to God. Muslims believe that under the Islamic State, the People of the Book can be brought back to the path of God and thereby can live truly righteous lives. The Islamic State provides a framework for the 'AHL Al-Kitab to adhere to. They are to be protected in part from themselves or from any who would hamper their worship -- and are thereby considered Al-Dhimmah, the Protected Peoples.

It becomes clear then, that in the medieval period, facing expulsion or forced conversion, the Jews considered the Islamic State as a true refuge which would allow them adherence to their own tradition. In the contemporary setting, however, Muslims believe that the People of the Book have once more strayed — this time into secularism, atheism, (until recently, communism), etc. — but they do not seek a haven which would bring them back to faithful practice. The Islamic State from this point of view is more of a threat to secular Jews than to the Ultra-Orthodox or Hassidim.

For example, Muslims are in agreement with the Ultra-Orthodox Jews in that they are willing to accept a return of the Kingdom of David — and 'Am Yisrael to Palestine if it is brought about by the Messiah, himself. And like the Orthodox, they will not accept a secular state, nor a State of Israel brought about simply through political struggle.

In brief, it can be seen that Islam considers itself the keeper of the legacy of the monotheistic tradition of the West. It is the religion of Muhammad insofar as the Qur'an was revealed to him. However, the religion is not considered to be "new" but rather the fulfillment of the same tradition.

As has been seen, Islam accepts the teachings of Jesus, Virgin Birth, and Christ as the Messiah who will come. The Qur'an does, however, correct what it considers to be errors in the gospels. It thereby considers itself to be an evolved form of Christianity, and hopes to lead Christians to a higher level of their own practice — even when this conflicts with what Muslims themselves are forbidden or find repulsive.

Islam also considers itself to be the religion of Moses. Throughout the Qur'an, God's voice can be heard lamenting the disobedience of the Children of Israel upon receiving the Commandments of the Lord. Again, the Qur'an admonishes the Jews for straying from their own given Path, not for their lack of conversion to Islam. The Qur'an is a re-giving of the Law, with the warning that it be adhered to strictly.

Most important of all, Islam considers itself to be the religion of Abraham, father of Ismaiel (and therefore, father to the Arabs), father of his second born, Isaac (who is revered as a prophet in Islam), founder of the Ka'aba Stone at Mecca (pilgrimage site of millions of Muslims each year), and recipient of a covenant with God. His children are promised a gift of land, a parcel which stretches, the Bible tells us, from the Nile to the Euphrates, and as far north as the Black Sea. From an Islamic point of view, this gift is intended for *all* the Children of Abraham. But its administration would best be served under the Islamic State, which protects the People of the Book from their own misdirection.

Lastly, Islam considers itself to be the religion of Adam, and thereby the religion of all humanity. It seeks ultimately, a reunification of the Peoples of the World -- not necessarily in the sense that they should become Muslim, (which they say, *would* be pleasing to God), but that Islam should at least promote adherence of faith among the Peoples under its jurisdiction.

## A Model for Contemporary Muslim-Jewish Relations

In conclusion, Muslims believe that their religion is simply a continuation and refinement of the Abrahamic tradition, and they find it difficult to understand the ignorance, contempt and derision by the West. (They even find [and you can test this yourselves] that volumes on Islam are frequently catalogued with "Eastern" religions and placed on bookstore shelves next to Hinduism, Buddhism, or even Tantra!)

Historically, the Islamic State has been a place of refuge for the Jews precisely because it promotes separate development and strict religiosity. It is only in an age of secularism, assimilation, laxity and levity regarding religion that the Islamic State becomes a threat. Most of all, the Islamic State of the Ottoman Turks held jurisdiction over Jerusalem, and Jewish access to that Holy Land was enhanced by Islamic rule. The State of Israel, brought about through armed struggle, includes secularism, assimilation (of sorts), laxity and levity in varying degrees, and on that holy land combines many of the elements Islam still seeks to correct. In essence, Islamic attitudes toward People of the Book have not changed, nor have the goals of the Islamic State Muslims today wish to restore.

But for Muslims, just as for Ultra-Orthodox Jews, some things, perhaps, must await the coming of the Messiah.

What seems abhorrent now to many in the West, once protected us — in contrast to our Spanish experience. We can thank the Islamic state, in part, for our having made it to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Sephardim at all. This kind of Islamic State I can support wholeheartedly in the parts of the Islamic world that seek their own model for State-building. It needs be created through the building of political institutions — not through the destruction of the States of others.