

Institution: SOAS
Unit of Assessment: 30 History
Title of case study: Informing public understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Gilbert Achcar)
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Professor Gilbert Achcar's book <i>The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives</i> has produced considerable impact outside of academia, greatly informing public understanding and debate around the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly concerning Holocaust denial in the Arab world and the charge that Israel uses the tragedy to its own advantage yet ignores the on-going displacement of Palestinians. The impact of his work is evidenced by substantial book sales, numerous reviews and interviews in the popular press, online debate in the Jewish press and blog postings, and invitations to Achcar to discuss his work on TV and radio, and to advise on documentaries and films exploring this issue.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Achcar has been teaching and researching at SOAS since 2007, having previously taught and researched at universities and research centres in Beirut, Berlin and Paris. His research interests are broad, covering the political economy and sociology of globalisation, empire theory and the unfolding of US hegemony globally and the sociology of religion, particularly of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. He has published extensively on these issues, with many of his monographs appearing in over fifteen languages, and his readership crossing the disciplines of international relations, development studies and history.</p> <p>An important historical theme explored extensively in Achcar's research is the opposing narratives surrounding the two defining traumas of the Arab-Israeli conflict: the Holocaust and the <i>Nakba</i>, the mass displacement of Palestinians that preceded and followed the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. These issues are examined most thoroughly in Achcar's <i>The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives</i> (2009). This book assesses two key issues relating to Middle East history that haunt present-day relations: the charge of Holocaust denial against the Arab world, and the accusation that Israelis exploit their own tragedy while ignoring that of their neighbours. Employing multiple written and oral sources, many of which were previously unavailable to non-Arabic speakers, Achcar traces Arab reactions to Nazism and anti-Semitism from 1933 to 1947, before shifting his study to more recent years, particularly the post-September 11 context. Though denouncing the anti-Semitism espoused by certain leaders and organisations, Achcar is critical of attempts to portray leading figures in the Arab world as having played an integral role in the Nazi campaign against European Jews. He highlights the differences between Western and Arab anti-Semitism, the latter being a more recent phenomenon, and places Arab responses to the Holocaust in political and historical context. Achcar's sensitive, objective treatment of this inflammatory topic reveals the more complex ideological and historical underpinnings of political leaders and movements in the Arab world, challenging assumptions that characterise the international propaganda war surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict.</p> <p>Achcar has since further examined the issue of Arab anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, notably in his 2012 article "Eichmann in Cairo: The Eichmann Affair in Nasser's Egypt." This article assesses the coverage of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, a key architect of the Holocaust, in <i>Al-Ahram</i>, the leading Egyptian newspaper under Nasser, flag-bearer of Arab nationalism and the struggle against Israel. Achcar explores the newspaper's range of responses towards Eichmann himself, Israel, Jews and Nazism to demonstrate that, in contrast to the equation of Nasserism with Nazism proposed by Israeli propaganda, <i>Al-Ahram's</i> coverage was concerned primarily with Israel's violation of international law and its exploitation of the whole affair. Achcar demonstrates that the newspaper offered a clear repudiation of Nazism, as well as anti-Semitism and racism in all its forms, along with its repudiation of Zionism. The article also appeared in French as the central piece in a collection of essays by Achcar, <i>Eichmann au Caire et autres essais</i> (2012), in</p>

which he returns to some of the themes explored in his monograph.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- a. *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*. London and New York: Saqi Books and Metropolitan / Macmillan, 2010. (The book has also been published in German, French and Arabic, and is currently translated into Spanish by the Editorial de la Universidad Veracruzana in Mexico).
- b. "Eichmann in Cairo: The Eichmann Affair in Nasser's Egypt." *Arab Studies Journal* 20/1 (2012): 74-103.
- c. *Eichmann au Caire et autres essais*. Paris: Sindbad / Actes Sud, 2012.
- d. "La reazioni all'Olocausto nel Medio Oriente arabo." (trad. Paolo Bragagni). In *Storia della Shoah. La crisi dell'Europa, lo sterminio degli ebrei e la memoria del XX secolo*, edited by Marina Cattaruzza et al., 869-900. Turin: UTET, vol. II, 2008.
- e. "Antisémitisme et négationnisme dans l'Orient arabo-musulman." In *Dictionnaire des racismes, de l'exclusion et des discriminations*, edited by Esther Benbassa, 143-6. Paris: Larousse, 2010.
- f. "Edward Said and Avraham Burg: Two Free Voices." In *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, edited by Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, 543-5. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Achcar's book has sold over 10,000 copies in five languages (French, German, Arabic, English and Spanish), a remarkably high figure for a scholarly work, and illustrative of its potentially incendiary subject matter and continued impact. The book has been widely reviewed in leading national and international newspapers, with many reviewers praising Achcar's impartiality, and his necessary call for a more balanced approach to the tragedies experienced on both sides. Indeed, a *Booklist* review contended that the text 'may show the path out of a seemingly intractable dispute.' Reviews and comments appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* (1, below), *The Economist* (2), *Times Literary Supplement*, *Independent* (x2) (3), *BBC History Magazine*, *New Republic*, *The National* (UAE), *Al-Itihad* (UAE), Reuters (whose review in Arabic was disseminated throughout the Middle East), *L'Express*, *Le Monde*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (leading pan-Arab dailies), and Qantara.de (a German Foreign Office-funded project promoting dialogue with the Islamic world), among numerous other publications. Even titles/reviewers differing with Achcar's point of view on some issues have highlighted its significant contribution to continued debates; the *Jewish Review of Books*, for example, stated that it is 'an important work, even – perhaps especially – for those who will not agree with it' (4). Its exploration of Arab sensibilities is thoughtful and illuminating, its condemnation of Holocaust denial humane and principled.' Much debate has, however, been elicited by Achcar's point of view, further evidence of its impact on current thinking around this issue. Commentators on IsraelForum.com have accused Achcar of being anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist, while his work has also been discussed in the *Jewish Chronicle* and on blogspots. Symmetrically, some Arab reviewers attacked Achcar for being too soft on Israel and Zionism and too empathic towards Holocaust victims.

Achcar himself has actively engaged with the media, disseminating his work to a wider audience. In April 2010, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, the leading Israeli newspaper, published a 2-page interview with him about his book, subsequently published in English in *The Jerusalem Report* (7). In 2011, he participated in the History Channel's documentary series, *Nazi Collaborators*, in an episode entitled 'The Grand Mufti.' (8) In addition to television viewers, the programme has received almost 4,000

views on YouTube alone. In July 2010, Achcar contributed to the BBC Radio 4 programme 'Hitler's Muslim Legions', which examined the participation of Muslims in Hitler's most brutal campaigns of WWII. Achcar also appeared in the four-part documentary series *Jews and Muslims: So Far, So Close*, commissioned by the Franco-German television network Arte. Arte screened the series, as did the worldwide francophone channel TV5, in autumn 2013, and it is expected to be shown on Norwegian and Swiss networks.

Achcar has written articles on the issues explored in his book in the *Guardian*, *Le Monde diplomatique* (to which he frequently contributes) (5) and on *Open Democracy*, an independent, not-for-profit site dedicated to inspiring debate (6); extracts from the books were also published on the latter.

Achcar was interviewed about his work by *Libération* (a leading national newspaper in France) (9), *The Electronic Intifada* website, an independent news publication focusing on Palestinian politics and culture, and truth-out.org, a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing independent news and commentary.

Additionally, Achcar has participated in several public engagements. In August 2010, he presented *The Arabs and the Holocaust* at the Edinburgh Book Fair, sharing the panel with well-known Israeli *Haaretz* journalist, Gideon Levy. He attended Jewish Book Week in London in March 2011, where a special panel was organised around the book with well-known Israeli historian Tom Segev as discussant; approximately 600 people attended (10). More recently (May 2013), Achcar was invited to discuss the book's themes at the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue in Vienna, a permanent centre of dialogue which encourages exchanges of ideas and opinions between academics, politicians and critical minds.

Impact is further evidenced by the email correspondence Achcar regularly receives. Numerous individuals have expressed their gratitude at his timely and sensitive treatment of the issue of Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism in the Arab world. One such individual commented that Achcar's book had finally enabled her to gain a greater understanding of the roots of her Palestinian father's denial of the Holocaust, allowing her, in turn, to gently challenge his assertions.

Achcar's questioning of the supposed universal nature of Arab and Muslim anti-Semitism has contributed enormously to on-going debates around this emotive issue, opening up new avenues of discussion and reflection that transcend prevailing stereotypes and myths on both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Achcar's work instead promotes the need for a deeper understanding of the historical contexts out of which these opposing narratives arose if an end to the conflict is ever to be envisaged.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Review of *The Arabs and the Holocaust* in the *Guardian*:
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/26/arabs-holocaust-israeli-war-narratives>
 [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
2. Review of *The Arabs and the Holocaust* in *The Economist*:
<http://www.economist.com/node/16789290> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
3. Review of *The Arabs and the Holocaust* in the *Independent*:
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-arabs-and-the-holocaust-the-arabisraeli-war-of-narratives-by-gilbert-achcar-2305801.html> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
4. Review of *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, in the *Jewish Review of Books*:
<https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/241/the-hands-of-others/> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].

5. Gilbert Achcar article in *Le Monde diplomatique*:
<http://mondediplo.com/2010/05/14blamethemufti> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
6. Gilbert Achcar article on the *Open Democracy* website:
<http://www.opendemocracy.net/gilbert-achcar/israel-writing-on-wall> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
7. Edited interview with Achcar in *The Jerusalem Report*: <http://www.jpost.com/Jerusalem-Report/Everybodys-Holocaust> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
8. History Channel, *Nazi Collaborators*, 'The Grand Mufti':
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeZxfsmzaiY> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
9. Interview with Achcar in *Libération*: http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2010/03/27/sait-on-qu-un-palestinien-a-cree-un-musee-de-l-holocauste_617597 [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].
10. Review of Achcar's talk at Jewish Book Week 2011:
<http://www.acheret.co.il/en/?cmd=articles.496&act=read&id=2557tp://> [Most recently accessed 14.11.13].