

# Investigating Orientalist Claims of Antisemitism in the Arab World and Morocco in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Bernard Lewis's Accounts of Jewish Experience as Study Case

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## Abstract

*Western attitudes to Jews changed drastically after World War Two. Historians of the experience of Jewish life everywhere in the world started rewriting this history from a more sympathetic angle. Perhaps more than any other religious group, the experience of Jews has had a remarkable presence in print, film, media and all forms of narratives transmission. One of the most prominent historians of Jews' experience in the Arab world and in Morocco is the British Orientalist Bernard Lewis. He belongs to, a by now, dubious discipline that became notorious for its ideological biases and discursive slippages that demonize its subjects of study and predispose public opinion in the West to tolerate aggression against the Arabs. Whence our interest in examining Lewis's narratives of Jewish experience at a turning point in the history of both Arabs and Jews: the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Given modern Westerners sympathy with Israel and their rewriting of the history of the Jews, and given Orientalist discourse' ideological biases, it is incumbent on us to examine to what extent were Lewis's accounts fair in their narrative.*

**Keywords:** 19<sup>th</sup> century Arab antisemitism, Jewish experience, Orientalist discourse, Bernard Lewis, Orientalist criticism.

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## 1.Introduction

Orientalist discourse on the Arabs is one aspect of the relationship between the West and the Middle East. Since the mid-decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Orientalism fell under the scrutiny of scholars from Arab backgrounds who sought to dismantle the huge edifice of “knowledge” about the Orient as it is presented to Westerners. The discursive biases: the ideological demonization of the Arab and the gross generalizations that stamped this discourse were jaw-dropping. These critics’ criticism demonstrates discrepancies between history, life and culture of the Orient and how inaccurate and at times fantastic were Western conceptions of them, which pressed the need for further research in the topic. Our interest in Orientalist discourse’s accounts of Jewish experience stems from two motives: first and given modern Westerners’ sympathy with Israel and the Zionist cause in general, this is bound to be a factor interfering with the imperative objective of fair handling of the subject. Second, given again Orientalist discourse inaccurate depiction of Arab history, life and nature; both factors put the need forth, on our part, to reexamine how Orientalist discourse presented Jewish experience under Muslim rule to Western and world readers in general.

The queries we seek to answer are: to what extent were Orientalist discourse’s accounts of Jewish experience under Muslim rule fair? Did the experience of the Western Jews, which in my opinion was harsher than anywhere else, influence Orientalists? Would their intimacy with this experience in the West blind their scholarly eyes to the gross and minute differences between the two experiences? For after all, Christianity and Islam are monotheistic religions that came after Judaism, and their relationship to Judaism was on the whole strained. Christian antisemitism is by now an old trope that accurately represents this schism that existed from early on in the Christian tradition between Christians and Jews. Islam’s early victory over Jewish attempts to discredit its prophet and the Jews’ loss in battle had a different impact on this relationship. Jewish life under Islam was tolerable. They enjoyed the *dhimmi* status, which allows them freedom of worship, a substantial margin of autonomy in running their affairs and the liberty to seek a livelihood by the skills and the means at their disposal.

In this paper we explore Orientalist discourse’s narrative of Jewish experience under Muslim rule. We have limited our interest to the work of the British Orientalist Bernard Lewis, and temporally to a short period that witnessed a change of attitude on the part of Arabs and Moroccans toward Jews within the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. We will proceed by giving brief definitions of the key terms: Orientalism and antisemitism. Then we will tackle the main topic of the paper: how objective is Lewis’s narrative of Jewish experience under Muslim rule? We divide this task into two parts. First, we will investigate Lewis’s narrative about the Arab change of attitudes toward Arab Jews in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: our interest is to demonstrate that this change of attitude was not the outcome of European influence of the antisemitic tradition, but had its motives elsewhere. Our next task is to investigate, validate or refute Lewis’s accurate or inaccurate description and characterization of Moroccan Jews’ life during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. We will explore the narratives from both perspectives; Lewis’s representing the Orientalist narrative, and Moroccan native historians’ perspective representing native narrative.

## 2. What is Orientalism?

Orientalism is a highly contentious designation today. So much so that one using it without referring, even briefly, to the changes its use has undergone through the ages risks not making sense at all. It is fitting, therefore, to start our paper by rehearsing a brief definition of the term, and a cursory detour suggesting how it fell from grace as a term designating allegedly a respectable discipline of study. Orientalism is the name given to the discipline concerned with the study of the Orient; the geographical area extending from North Africa west to Japan east. Bernard Lewis, himself an Orientalist, argues that Orientalism “has been a branch of scholarship... which dates from the great expansion of scholarship in Western Europe from the time of the Renaissance onward.” (Lewis, 1982) Lewis contends: The area deserving of the name the ‘Orient’ for these scholars early on was the Middle East and their early scholarly interest was centered on Hebrew. Further interest in other Middle Eastern languages and areas developed in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and after, and drew subsequent generations of Orientalists to the study of the area, its languages, history, arts and law, extending this interest further East to Oriental civilizations like China and India.

By the mid-twentieth century the term ‘Orientalism’ and its derivatives came under scrutiny by Orientalists themselves and by critics of Orientalism. So much so that the label fell into lasting disrepute. The first serious turning point in the use of the word touched on the term ‘Orientalist’. It was in the twenty-ninth International Congress of Orientalists in 1973, convening in Paris, that the congressional majority voted in favor of abandoning the label ‘Orientalist’ and instead opted for more accurate labels denoting area studies specialists and specialties. (Lewis, 1982) The second and most devastating incident, which temporally preceded the Orientalists Congress a decade earlier, was the Egyptian scholar Anouar Abdel-Malek’s revisionist argument that Orientalism has up till that point in history posited its object of study i.e; the Oriental as this different other, assumed in him an unchanging essence (Abdel-Malek, 1963/1981) going back in history and simultaneously unaffected by historical forces grinding their axes around and within him and is, in Spivak’s terms, unable to speak for himself. This thematization covered not only peoples, but also nations and cultures. These metaphysical, learned and ‘characterized typologies’ were unquestionably devised and taken as *a priori* conditions of possibility for further knowledge on the Orient and Orientals.

Abdel-Malek’s argument inspired Edward Said’s eye-opening work *Orientalism* (1978). His ideas were developed, given extensive proofs, and taken to the extremes of polemic by Said. The crux of Said’s work is: that, first, the West’s culture has, from the times of Aeschylus (525/ 524-456 BC) to the present day developed and subsequently instituted a discourse about the Orient and Orientals redolent with fantastic, homogenizing and heritable tropes cum images essentializing and othering the area and its people (Said, 1978). The Orient became a land of exotic landscapes and climes, fantastic creatures, sensual women; absolute despots wearing robes, turbans and daggers; deranged, sanguinary fanatics, supine servitude, jaw-dropping traditions and conduct... etc, and all are comportmental essences of the Orient and Orientals. Millennia of time resulted only in superficial variations on the same tropes and images in this discourse and some institutional

changes that fixed further this denigrating image of Europe's most intimate and geographically closest other. Second, on the domestic front in the West this discourse has had the effect of predisposing public opinion to accept these inaccurate, inconsiderate and indiscriminate conceptions of the Orient and Orientals as facts, whence the loosening of moral standards, judgments and attitudes when Western aggression, colonial exploitation and oppression sat eyes on the Orient, its territories and its peoples. For Orientalism is, in Said's terms, a discourse, a form of knowledge, that has from early on, been in the service of power. Apart from the fact that some Orientalists filled the rank and file of the colonial armies as experts, advisors and governors, even those at home or in the colonies, who seemingly had no direct interest in the colonial adventure, like travel writers, artists, novelists, poets and so on, compiled cultural material that rationalized and justified colonial plunder, oppression and even genocide.

Said's work has stirred unabating controversies and opened undreamed-of vistas of research for several academic disciplines. His central argument has so far stood the test of time. What came under heavy critical shelling from Orientalists and conservative intellectuals alike, mainly in the West, were his 'disrespect' of rather minor academic conventions like: The fact that he was a comparative literature specialist dealing with history (Habib, 2005, pp.40-46), his insufficient coverage of Orientalist scholarship in languages like German, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian; his provocative excessive polemic (Lewis, 1982), his decontextualized misuse of quotes, and his gross and inconsiderate generalizations about, and wholesale condemnation of, Orientalist scholarship that differed in no way from those of the very discourse he was criticizing.<sup>6</sup>

Said's brilliance lies in the use to which he put Michel Foucault's theory of discourse. Discourse is a way of organizing knowledge about a subject, using specific language and having the support, conservation and propagation of real institutions. By itself a discourse is only as important as it affects behaviors, simultaneously setting limits to others, fix habits and mold humans in such a manner that they take the limits of discourse for natural limits. Some Orientalists, having inherited a discourse about the Orient, rarely paused, rethought or reassessed the biased claims this discourse makes about Orientals. They have accepted them for facts, whence their political passivity towards, even enthusiastic endorsement of, their domestic civil, judicial and security institutes' discrimination against, and foreign policy institutes' aggression toward, Orientals. Whence our interest in examining how Orientalist discourse covered the Jewish experience in the Arab world and Morocco.

### **3. What is antisemitism?**

Antisemitism has been overused as a term in world literature and media since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The word's definition boils down to 'hatred of Jews' (Kassel, M. 2021, 7 December). Orchestrated, "violent popular hatred of Jews" and assaults on Jewish people, property and places of worship in every form is considered antisemitic (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Special

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<sup>6</sup> This is the Lebanese Marxist philosopher Mahdi Amel's critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. See his work. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. *Hali l'akl lilgharb Wa lqalb li Cha'rq*. Al Farabi Publishing House: Beirut. 2006.

Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism [OSEMCA], 2016). Some enthusiastic Zionists expand the scope of antisemitic acts to include all kinds of criticism condemning Israel's use of force against the Palestinian people, criticism of Israeli state policy and the conduct of Israeli military personnel in the ever-expanding illegal settlements in Palestinian lands. Anti-Semitism has deep roots in Western societies. But it was reinvigorated as late as the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Russia, Eastern Europe, Germany and France. This was the time when national sentiments were on the rise and forms of racism and others' hatred were pervasive. Racist tropes included racial and social groups within European societies, and Western colonial nations *vis-à-vis* pretty much the rest of the world without.

What stands out in Western antisemitism is the fact that it had an overwhelming sway over German and French intelligentsia at the time and was propagated through print, caricature, public speeches and public behavior (Avineri, 2008). It was deliberate and thought-through in terms of the amount of "respectable" names addressing the subject in books, pamphlets and journalistic writings that were devoted to the topic. So much so that it soon caught up with public anti-Jewish sentiments, had fervent endorsement as an idea and as practice among student fraternities, diverse civil organizations and political parties on both the left and the right. What Hannah Arendt calls "race thinking" (Arendt, 1951) is but the act of compiling, mythologizing, elaborating, scientizing – a trend of the age- and propagating sentiments of hate and hostility of the lowest common denominator against others as valid knowledge. The general appeal of race thinking proved enormous, as racist slurs and daily persecution of Jews multiplied in the streets and public places of Vienna and wherever Jews could be found in Areas in Europe touched by antisemitic sentiments.

Arendt and the Israeli historian Shlomo Avineri's conceptions of antisemitism are similar. They hold that there are forms of hatred directed against a racial group – in this case the Jews – by individuals with anomalous predispositions to those prevalent in a society – that are part of common living in every human social group. These are rather pathetic and marginal convictions and behaviors that are usually overlooked by the rest of the sane society in question. They are isolated phenomena. Avineri seems to distinguish the two trends, for example, when he argues that young Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism, was aware that the German racist philosopher Eugen Dühring's propaganda book about the Jews (1881) and a subsequent ceremony of a student fraternity club's applause to an antisemitic speech in Vienna were not "an *isolated phenomenon*, but, rather, a manifestation of a growing political anti-Semitic trend in German-speaking lands and elsewhere." (Arendt, 1951) Then there are collective, organized, thought-through campaigns like the one against Jews culminating in the Holocaust that merit the designation 'antisemitic.' Arendt seems to suggest the same thing when she alternatively uses the term "antisemitism" and the expression "the violent popular hatred of Jews" as synonyms.

What distinguishes the serious menace of antisemitism from individual marginal and passing whims is the fact that it is institutionalized. Take the Ku-Klux-Klan in the US for example: Groups of whites that designed members' outfits, held marches, had a hierarchy and their members took great pains in attending rites and rituals of massacres of black people, with the necessary

paraphernalia and executed their crimes with method. Nothing was left to chance; the outfits, the Bible, the Cross on fire, and the instruments of torture and murder. This is what I mean when I distinguish here, following Arendt and Avineri's trend, between isolated individual actions of racial hatred, and those institutionalized, organized and orchestrated campaigns of hatred. Irregular convictions and behaviors exist in every society. It is a statement of fact to say that uncommon convictions of racism, religious fanaticism, bigoted nationalist sentiments...etc are bound to exist.

What's more, every society has, invents and needs enemies in a sense (Eco, 2011). It happens that some societies have enemies without; others invent and need enemies within. Whether these are: the Jews, the immigrants, the blacks, the physically-disabled, the homosexuals, the Muslims...etc, societies invent and need enemies. I am not defending racist thought or behavior; I am describing a basic human need and preoccupation. Having a unanimous consensus on the noble need for hatred to disappear is – in a sense—anti-human. The Italian philosopher Umberto Eco expresses this rather urgent human “need” well in an essay entitled “Inventing the Enemy.” He argues that human societies badly *need* enemies to reinforce the group's identity, achieve internal unity and fortify themselves against foreign threat. My contention, therefore, is that outbursts of violence against Jews in Morocco prior to 1948 are indeed isolated, socially unacknowledged and mob phenomena. They are not, in my opinion, antisemitic acts in the sense of Western-style antisemitism; an organized, thought-through body of thought and behavior that is constant. There were exceptions to this in Morocco's long history, but on the whole, antisemitism has rarely been endorsed by sane people, and waves of violence that touched Jewish life were isolated phenomena.

Our next task in this paper is to examine and investigate Orientalist discourse covering the history of Jews in the Arab world and Morocco, and to what extent it has been biased or unbiased in this coverage. The method is clear: we will relate the Orientalist narratives and examine their objective validity by comparing them with native narratives about the issues at the designated time.

#### **4.Examining Bernard Lewis's historical accounts of Arab Jews life under Muslim rule**

Bernard Lewis (1916- 2018) was a well known British- American Oriental studies specialist and a public intellectual. He was a prolific author whose interest covered millennia in Arab history, and a geographical area of Islam's spread across Asia eastward, Africa west and southward, Northern Asia and Eastern Europe. He wrote several books and essays about the Jews of Islam. His many works on the subject, as I see them, display a disturbing and ill-justified ambivalence. On the one hand, he argues, throughout his many works on the status of Jews and other religious minorities in Muslim lands, that their treatment under Muslim rule was favorable<sup>7</sup> to what their Western co-religionists had to deal with for example. On the other hand, he repeatedly argues that modern Muslims have replaced the Nazis and communist Russia in their hatred of Israel and the West. His

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<sup>7</sup> See Lewis Bernard (1990). In this article (“The roots of Muslim rage”) Lewis argues that Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire were given extensive rights that even modern European states do not provide for their minorities. That the Jews had their courts and schools that even though alcohol was forbidden in the empire, the Jews had the right to consume it in their homes and rites, that legal arbitration was often shared between Muslim and Jewish courts in cases wherein a Muslim and a Jew had a legal dispute.

description is an exaggeration to say the least, but what disturbs more in his scholarship is the interpretation he provides for this change of behavior.

Lewis's basic maxim about Muslim- Jewish relations within Muslim territories is this: up to the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jews' life under Muslim rule was generally tolerable; they enjoyed the right to worship, to conduct trade and to run their affairs on their own. The changes in the mood of Muslims towards Jews began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century *under Western antisemitic influence*. [emphasis is mine]. Under Ottoman rule, for example, Jews enjoyed relative comfort, peace and prosperity unknown to them elsewhere in the West before World War Two (Lewis, 2007). The exceptions to this Lewis singles out are Morocco and Iran, wherein Jews, he claims, were occasionally subject to waves of violence, restriction of movement, confinement to specific quarters in cities and the obligation to dress in particular garbs with special colors denoting their religious identity.

But all of these rather favorable living conditions, which the Jews enjoyed under Muslim rule came to an end during the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and antisemitism flourished from then on. Lewis attributes Muslim hostility to the Jews to the impact of colonial Europe (Lewis, 1986). In characterizing what type of influence he is talking about Lewis uses terms he imports from biology like: "infect" and "stages of infection". For him, Arabs, the blind herd, were so baffled by Europeans that they 'imported' –Lewis's word – this trend of hatred just for this purpose: to placate the desire to look like Europeans. The Arabs even learned how to hate from Europeans, Lewis's words again: the Muslims learned from Europe "new ideologies of hatred and new techniques of repression" through priests, missionaries and commercial emissaries. 'How likely would a 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim be influenced by a European missionary protected by a Christian colonial army occupying his land?' seems like a question that Lewis never asks and therefore does not bother to answer. In addressing the exact mechanism of this influence Lewis argues that it was through nationalism; a newly imported ideology to the Arab world from Europe, and that moreover Arabs learned to hate the imperial powers and the Jews, his words:

"The subsequent growth of Arab anti-Semitism to its present tidal proportions is due to many causes – to the imperialist challenge and national response, to the mingling of imported chauvinism and home-grown fanaticism, to the rise, in a time of violent and painful change, of a new intolerance that exacerbated all hatreds and angered all minorities." (Lewis, 1984).

Nowhere in Lewis's quote do we find any mention of, what I believe, are a lot more serious reasons behind this change of attitude on the part of Arabs toward Jews.

This period in Western history –the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – coincides with the rise of antisemitism (Eco, 2011), particularly in Germany and France; a historical fact which, in Lewis's consideration, led Muslims; belonging to a defeated and backward civilization, to the emulation of their former Christian foes, turned idols now (Eco, 2011). To my mind, Lewis's explanation of the sudden rise of antisemitism in Arab lands in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the result of young Arabs' fascination with, and emulation of, Western antisemitism is hilariously unworldly. He

glosses over gross historical facts that explain better the rise of Arab hostility to the local Jews. How come news of the spread of antisemitism in the West reached the Arabs, who blindly sought to emulate their European “superiors”, but not the news of Zionist activities planning to establish a state for Jews in Palestine? Why wouldn’t the gradual rise and spread of Arab antisemitism be seen as a reaction against Zionist plans, but, explained instead, as an idiotic replication of Christians’ behavior toward the Jews in Europe? Why wouldn’t Arabs living in Palestine at the time develop a form of awareness of the plans behind the increasing Jewish immigration to their land?

Let us examine this point in history from both perspectives: I mean developments in the West and the possibility of their influence on Muslim societies, despite the possible lag the slower means of communication at the time could cause. On the one hand, the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are a point in history in which Herzl and his Zionist colleagues from all over Europe were concocting the Zionist scheme to overtake Palestine as home for Jews of the world (Avineri, 2008). Theodor Herzl (1860- 1904) began his political career as the father of Zionism in 1885. Though it is known that he kept his early activities for the Zionist cause secret, later public activities like the Zionist Congresses were made public by media coverage. Herzl’s brilliant plans for the Jewish state were published in book form in 1896. Moreover, as a journalist Herzl wrote for papers in both France and Germany. What’s more, the early wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine started in the 1880s. These new arrivals, though able early on to disguise their land purchases, with no avowed pretense or intent of occupying the land and expanding from the few colonies already in existence, had conflicts with local Arabs over grazing lands and water supplies dating as early as the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ben-Bassat, 2009, pp. 42-63). The news of their quarrels with local Arabs spread throughout the villages culminating in the bloody struggles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the other hand, considering that Arab students’ delegations and Arab embassies were present in Europe long before this date, it is clear that news of the Zionist plans, or at least, rumors about the subject had reached Arab lands through them. Seen in this light the new hostility toward Jews in Arab lands can be explained in a more convincing way than the explanation suggested by Lewis. It was a reaction against the encroaching Zionist plans to settle-colonize Palestine. Lewis ignores all these worldly factors, with real influence, in the general mood of the Arabs toward Jews at the designated time. This gross overlooking of parallel historical facts; this unsettling amnesia, dates back in Zionist literature on the subject to Herzl’s early writing and thoughts on the question of: “what was to be done about the indigenous inhabitants?”, he rarely addressed the question, and when he did, it was always with his liberal attitude of political tolerance the Jews should extend to the Arabs. For example, upon meeting the Chancellor of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany in Jerusalem in 1898 Herzl was asked: “how much territory were the Zionists asking for? Up to Beirut or perhaps beyond?” Herzl’s response was: ‘we will ask for what we need – the more immigrants, the more land.’” (Avineri, 2008). Not a word passed between Herzl and the Chancellor about the Arabs of Palestine, their destiny, their property, the very territory they plough and harvest and where they have buried their ancestors for millennia...!

Lewis's discussion of Islam's theological issues is usually rich and convincing. Not the same thing, however, applies to how these theological rules of conduct influence, or mostly, in Lewis's case, should influence daily Muslim conduct. He never hesitates to chastise Muslims for not being obedient enough to their theological prescriptions. His interpretation of why and how Muslims came under Western influence and how uncritical they were in imitating their Western "idols" is weird and unconvincing to say the least. He often invokes passing sentiments on the parts of Muslims like envy of the US's style of life, jealousy of the West's prosperity compared with their relative decay, and the irrational, unjustifiable and fanatic hatred of Jews as rational explanations for Arab hostility to Israel, the US and the West in general. Their terror and fanaticism are all symptoms of these sentiments.

If Lewis asked, and he would be justified in his question: why would Syrian Muslims react with acts of hatred against local Jews at this time, while Zionist plans were meant for Palestine? For after all, the issue of land occupation by Zionists concerns the Palestinians and not the Syrians, or Moroccans for that matter. The answer to this query lies in the history of Islam, Islamic theology and Arabs as a race. For Muslims, from the early revelations of Quranic verses the *Umma*, the community of believers in Islam, is a fundamental concept that has operated as a glue linking Muslims together. Through the *Umma* Muslims share a feeling of togetherness in this life, and a rewarding fate in the hereafter. They are bound by the bonds of faith in monotheism, veneration of *Allah's* prophet, and unquestioning obedience of *Allah's* will as it is revealed to his prophet in words known as the *Qur'an*. This bond of *brotherhood*, which is so strong among Muslims that the prophet used an organic parable to describe it in a well-known *Hadith*, is informing. The *Hadith* says: "The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever." (Al-Bukhārī, n.d., ḥadīth 6011). Moreover, not only do Muslims share this bond alone, But Muslim Arabs also share a further form of belonging, which is that of race. The *Umma* is a term often used interchangeably with both adjectives: Arab and Islamic. We have here two of the strongest known forms of bonds known to, and studied by, anthropologists: bonds of belonging to one faith and bonds of belonging to one race. Post-colonial developments in the Arab Muslim world added national inconveniences in the face of these bonds, but it remains a little weaker, and a lot newer than the former two bonds.

Considered in this way, hostility against Jews everywhere in the Arab Muslim world is seen as an-eye-for-an-eye reaction against Zionism. What's more, I assume that the historical conditions of the time being that most of the Arab Muslims had been under foreign colonization enforced by Christian Europe, Islam's earliest and most bitter foe, adds further twist to the topic. Due to these circumstances sentiments of solidarity with Palestine against an imminent, planned foreign occupation by Jews, with the approval and aid of the already existent Christian British colonization are bound to be high. And popular reactions against cases of similar import are bound to be in the form of popular outbursts of violence. I must caution the reader here, I am not justifying the act, I am instead arguing that unlike antisemitic sentiments and acts in Europe at the time, which were pure hatred; hatred for hatred's sake, Muslim acts of hostility against Jews can, in comparison be,

not approved of for sure, but need to be understood as popular reactions, and popular reactions are rarely sane.

### 5.Examining Lewis’s account of Jewish experience in Morocco

Lewis’ generalizations do not stop here. He goes on to address, briefly, the living conditions of Jews under particular regimes in the Arab world; among those we find in his works scattered references to Moroccan Jews. He argues that with few exceptions in the Muslim world Jews were allowed to roam Muslim dominions and practice trade or crafts as befit their inclination and learning. Unlike elsewhere in Islamic lands Moroccan Jews were *confined to ghettos in residence and occupation*, Lewis’s words: “unlike the Jews of Europe, [the Jews of Islam] ... were – with certain exceptions, for example in Iran and Morocco – confined in neither territorial or occupational ghettos, but were fairly free in their choice of residence and profession. They enjoyed freedom of worship, and some autonomy in their communal affairs.” (Lewis, 1984). Lewis does not discriminate between the more oppressive confinement of the Jews of Europe to ghettos, which were meant to isolate them for all their alleged “innate evil, their sickening rituals of blood libel, their malevolent scheming to conquer the world...etc, and Jewish quarters in Moroccan cities, which were meant to protect them.

Lewis goes on. In his work *The Jews of Islam* he enumerates aspects of what he considers Jews’ misery under Moroccan rulers, which became worse from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward: the obligation to wear a specific garb with a definitive color that demonstrates their religious belonging, to walk barefoot, or wear straw sandals when stepping out of their designated quarters, their confinement to specific quarters called *mellahs*, the taxes (heavier than usual at times ) enforced upon them by the *dhimmi* status (and which is interpreted by Lewis not as a reward for Muslim protection, but as “a symbolic expression of subordination;”) the permission, sometimes requirement of *dhimmi* women to walk out barefaced (which Lewis interprets as a way of equaling Jew (and Christian) females with female slaves, who were permitted or required to do the same. Moreover, in Lewis’s views, this demonstrates the Muslim discrimination against these women in terms of social decency and propriety associated with the veil Muslim women were required to wear outdoors.

Let us address each of Lewis’s claims alone. First, Lewis does not hesitate to liken the Jewish quarters in Moroccan cities known as *mellahs* to European ghettos. He even uses the word ghetto to talk about *mellahs*, which is a grave historical inaccuracy. While ghettos in Europe were instituted to isolate an unwanted social group i.e. the Jews, not the same rules can be said about Jewish quarters in Moroccan cities. In a brilliant essay, the American historian Emily Gottreich explores the origins and social significance of the *mellah* of Marrakesh. Built in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the *mellah* was initiated with intentions far nobler than those behind the institution of the ghettos in Europe. Gottreich stresses this point when she argues: “However striking such parallels [parallel trajectories between the *mellah* and the ghetto] may be, care must nonetheless be taken not to overstate their significance. For just as Rome is not Marrakesh, the *mellah* is not a ghetto.” (Gottreich, 2003, pp.287-305). Listing the differences, Gottreich argues that the *mellah* of

Marrakesh, for example, was built near the royal palace in the city due to: 1) the fact that the Sa'di dynasty claimed a dubious *Sherifian* descent; a central requirement in the legitimization of rule in Morocco since the Idrissids, which 'proves' the ruling dynasty's descent from the offspring of the prophet of Islam. The Sa'di *Sherifian* claims were refuted by the *Ulema*; religious scholars of Fes. This refutation of Sa'di legitimacy posed a serious threat for their dominion over Fes; already a major imperial city, and the North in general. This pushed the Sa'dis to initiate a policy of *bunyan*; erecting monuments to defend their legitimacy against speculators, rebuilding the city of Marrakesh, attempting in the process to create a newer and better Fes; the rival imperial city. So the declaration on the part of the Sa'di Sultan Abdallah al-Ghalib to initiate the building of a *mellah* for the Jews of Marrakesh was part of a general plan to renew and polish the city.

2) The building of the Marrakech *mellah* was an attempt on the part of al-Ghalib to propagate a good name for the dynasty against suspicions mentioned earlier. 3) *Mellahs* in Moroccan cities are often found next to the royal palaces. This explains why they were created in the first place, which is: a commitment on the part of the Sultans to the *dhimmi* status, which dictates protecting religious minorities within Muslim dominions. Another reason is the fact that the Jews of Morocco are often remembered today as an industrious people, whose good skills in crafts, trade and other feats were often needed by the royal palace, and so locating them nearby served this purpose. 4) Becoming the hub of monument-erecting activities Marrakesh attracted artisans, craftsmen and builders from everywhere in the country and even from abroad. Added to this, the arrival of expelled Jews from *Al-Andalus* required the expansion of Jewish quarters to accommodate the new arrivals.

Moreover, it is a grave mistake to ignore the differences between social life in the *mellah* and life in the ghetto. In the former, Gottreich argues, life was porous. Muslims crossed the quarter daily pursuing their daily interests and the *mellah* served Christian merchants from Europe as a place of abode and a center for conducting their trade. So the Jewish quarter in Marrakech for example harbored no intent on the part of its builders to isolate the Jews and seclude them in particular quarters that defied their attempts to have normal relations with the rest of the population, their life and work environment. On a popular level, Muslim visitors of Muslim saints shrines often prayed in neighboring shrines of Jewish saints (Hmammouchi, 2022, p. 74-75).

Another claim made by Lewis, which we have addressed above, is the change in Muslim attitude toward Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which he claims was due to the influence of Christian Europe, and a reaction against Jewish embrace of modernization. The Moroccan comparative religions specialist Ahmad Chehlan (1944) for example provides historical evidence that refutes Lewis's claims. He says that Jews lived a normal life in Morocco, conducted their trade, were appointed to high positions in governments, and befriended the ruling Sultans. Chehlan argues that during the mid-decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Jews of Essaouira; a major port city on the Atlantic coast of the country at that time, were the majority traders: 14 out of 19 traders were Jews. By the 1880s there were 31 Jewish traders out of 51. More than that, Chehlan cites royal decrees and letters exchanged between the Sultans and the wealthy Jewish merchants in Essaouira, which demonstrates the intimate terms these merchants were on with the Sultan (Chehlan, 2009).

Another claim made by Lewis is that among the forms of humiliation the Jews of Morocco had to undergo was the fact that they were forced to walk barefoot. It is true that Jews were forced to abide by certain regulations like this one. But it is inaccurate that they had to do so everywhere. There were places before which Jews were required to show humility like mosques and sanctuaries; forms of this humility included walking barefoot until they pass the places in question. Reciprocal veneration of Jewish sacred sanctuaries, in fact, voluntarily applied to Moroccan Muslims as well. Several Jewish shrines and synagogues in Morocco were even visited by Muslims in search of worldly or otherworldly things.

It is a fact that Moroccan Jews were occasionally subject to sporadic outbursts of violence, on yet rarer occasions forced to convert to Islam and had at times to abide by codes of dress that distinguished them from the general population, but on the whole their life was normal. It was under special circumstances like the occasional droughts and famines, plagues and foreign threat that Jewish life fell under duress. Like the rest of the population they were forced to secure their livelihood in times of famines under unpleasant circumstances; some were forced to convert to Christianity to receive aid from European missionaries. Forced conversion under Muslim threat of death was, however, a rare event in the history of the country. On the contrary most Jewish quarters had the political figure of *Sheikh al-Yahud* who arbitrated quarrels and ran the affairs of his co-religionists with no qualms or interference from Muslim authorities. They had a vibrant culture with folklore activities ranging from hymns and poetry, to music and songs and a highly sophisticated philosophical and literary culture (Zafrani, 1983).

That Moroccan Jews were treated with a mix of mild tolerance and silent contempt is possibly true. Popular narratives about the relationships between Muslims and Jews in Morocco still relate anecdotes on the piety and humility a Jew was required to show in public places, but that there was a systematic antisemitic thought tradition and acts is also an inflammatory unneeded exaggeration; just like the idea that the Arabs replaced the Nazis and the communists in their “unjustified” hatred of the US, Israel and the West in general (Lewis, 1990, pp.47-60). Public attitudes and opinions of this kind are often moved to action and articulation by acts of aggression undertaken by the US, Israel or both against Arabs or Muslims for that matter. That there is an obsessive form of hatred of both, for hatred’s sake, or for other reasons Orientalists devise like jealousy, envy or some such is a highly ungrounded, idiosyncratic interpretation of more than a millennium and half of complex relationships between Islam and the West.

## **6.Conclusion**

The relationship between Muslims and their northern Christian neighbors is a long and complex one. Prior to Islam, the relationship between the classic Occident and Orient was strained. From the conflicts of the Persians on one side and Spartans and Athenians on the other this relationship knew, and still, ebbs and tides of invasions and counter invasions that left the two shores of the Mediterranean in almost perpetual enmity. Developments like the arrival of monotheistic religions, primarily Christianity and Islam exacerbated the already existing animosity. The historical acts of

aggression and counter aggression fed and were fed in turn by, a by now, an elephantine edifice of cultural stereotyping entertained by the peoples of the two continents: Images of enlightened, democratic Spartans, Athenians and Romans on the one side, and despotic Orientals on the other; noble warriors on the eastern shores and degenerate savage Occidentals on the northern one; “saved” communities of faith east and south of the Mediterranean and hell-destined alterers of the Book north; democratic republics of the West and tyrants of the modern Middle East, are overarching generalized images that each people entertain on the other.

The latest development in this relationship is the effort made by critics of Orientalism to dismantle this grand edifice of exaggerated knowledge of the other. Our task in this paper was to trace one line of this effort. I have tried throughout to examine Orientalist claims made by the historian Bernard Lewis about the experience of Arab and Moroccan Jews throughout their long history sharing life with Muslims, with a particular focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> century; a turning point in the history of this relationship. The change started with the rise of violent actions directed against Arab Jews by their Christian and Muslim compatriots during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lewis argues that most of Jewish life under Muslim rule was on the whole tolerable until this point in history. The cause for this change, contends Lewis, came under the influence of the antisemitic tradition from the West. I think Lewis’s interpretation of this change is unworldly. As I argue in this paper, the causes of the change are deeper and far reaching. They were reactions against the Zionist plans to establish a Jewish state in Palestine and the increasing Jewish immigration to the holy land.

Other claims Lewis makes about the experience of Moroccan Jews this time are on the whole inaccurate. Lewis often likens and compares Jews experience in Morocco to their co-religionists’ experience in Europe which was, in my opinion, harsher and far crueler. The Jews’ isolation in *mellahs*, the obligation that they walk barefoot in public, the obligation to wear specific garbs with specific colors...etc are claims, some of which are gross generalizations, and others as I have proven are inaccurate descriptions of this experience that veer towards demonizing Muslim and Moroccan dispositions. In fact, Lewis is not the first Orientalist to commit himself as an allegedly honest historian of Islam to such generalizations. He has a history behind him of intellectuals, artists, travel writers, comparative politics specialists...,the list goes on, of a whole culture with a long history of misrepresentations that often slip into demonization. His final assessment in several essays on the relationship between the West and Islam leads him to compare Muslims to Nazis and communists for their unabating and irrational hatred of the West and Israel. A step, in my opinion, as dishonest and irrational as the claim made there.

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