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## Bird Spies and Poisoned Tomatoes: New Rumors and Legends in the Middle East

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### Cover Page Footnote

I want to thank Professors Simon Bronner and Tsafi Sebba-Elran for their encouragement and assistance. I am also grateful to two anonymous readers whose suggestions and challenges raised the level of the essay. Thanks as always to Ona Siporin for her careful reading and her attention to writing and reasoning, as well as her enthusiasm. I delivered an earlier version of this essay, then titled "Unbelievable Legends and Laughable Rumors," at the annual meeting of the Western States Folklore Society in Logan, Utah, in 2014.



# Bird Spies and Poisoned Tomatoes: New Rumors and Legends in the Middle East

STEVE SIPORIN

New rumors and legends about spy animals, attack animals, and attempted mass poisonings, all purportedly the work of Israel, circulate in Middle Eastern newspapers, television, and radio. This essay answers two sets of questions regarding these narratives, one regarding belief and the other regarding antisemitism. The analysis shows that the rumors and legends express attitudes in addition to conveying information. Whether or not any, some, or all these transgressions occurred, the narratives ineluctably serve to assert and confirm the depravity of a constructed enemy. They reveal unexpected continuities with age-old antisemitic folklore.

**N**ew rumors and legends about the use of weaponized animals and attempted mass poisonings by Israel appeared in the media in the second decade of the twenty-first century. BBC News reported a typical example on May 16, 2012:

## *Turkey Villagers See Israeli Spy in Migratory Bird*

A migratory bird has caused alarm in a village in south-eastern Turkey after locals mistook it for an Israeli spy. Villagers' suspicions were aroused when the bird, a common European bee-eater, was found dead in a field with a metal ring around its leg stamped "Israel." They called the police after deciding its nostrils were unusually large and may have carried a microchip fitted

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by Israeli intelligence for spying. It was taken to government experts for examination and declared safe.

The BBC's Jonathan Head, in Istanbul, says the regional office of the Turkish Agriculture Ministry examined the colourfully plumed corpse and assured residents of the village, near the city of Gaziantep, that it was common practice to fit a ring to migratory birds in order to track their movements. An official at the ministry told the BBC that it took some effort to persuade local police that the little bee-eater posed no threat to national security. At one point a counterterrorism unit became involved in the case.

Our correspondent says that wildly implausible conspiracy theories take root easily in Turkey, with alleged Israeli plots among the most widely believed. (*BBC News*, 2012)<sup>1</sup>

This Western media news story reports and at the same time discounts a bird spy rumor that was evidently taken seriously in Turkey. It may come across as humorous—a story about naïve villagers, gullible local police, and even susceptible counterterrorists. Still, the report might not seem all that significant if it were the only text regarding bird spies and not part of a larger pattern. But similar rumors about bird spies suspected of being sent from Israel have been reported from Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan (Diehl 2011; “Israeli ‘Spy Vulture’ Returned After Being Captured in Lebanon” 2016; Keating 2013; “Military Animal” 2014; Okbi 2013; O’Sullivan 2012; Smith 2013; Tait 2012; Yaron 2011).

Bird spy rumors as well as other new rumors and legends about spy animals, attack animals, and attempted mass poisonings, all the work of Israel, raise questions: Who tells these stories? Does anyone believe them? If they are believed, how can that be, and if not, why are they told? How does their recounting diverge in different contexts? What do they mean? Do these new anti-Israel rumors and legends bear any relationship to the tropes of traditional antisemitic folklore?

In addressing these questions, this essay advances two main ideas regarding bird spy and other rumors and legends. The first regards belief. These stories were reported in two different contexts: the Western-oriented, English-language media (e.g., the BBC, above) and the local, native-language media (typically the

main source of the Western news stories). Each context retains its own biases; the ways in which the stories are retold, relying on the rhetoric of the legend (Oring 2008), reinforce longstanding stereotypes. The stories as told in Arab, Iranian, and Turkish news outlets may be presented as true, or at least possible, while they are mocked in Western media as ridiculous, with some characteristics of jokes.

The second idea that this essay advances regards antisemitic folklore. According to Zionist ideology and Jewish historiography, there is thought to have been a major cultural break between the character of the “old” Jew of the Diaspora and the character of the “new” Jew of modern Israel. However, the legends and rumors examined here suggest that the negative stereotype of Israeli Jews is remarkably consistent with the age-old stereotype of Diaspora Jews and continues to be promulgated in new legends and rumors in the Middle East today.

Before delving into the rumors and legends themselves, I will provide some perspective regarding my assumptions and approach. First, all folklore is *esoteric*. That is, it circulates within groups and articulates insider conceptions and values of those groups. Classic examples of Jewish esoteric *narrative* folklore would be stories about biblical characters like King Solomon or Elijah the Prophet, legends of the Baal Shem Tov, trickster tales about Joha, and much, much more. But some folklore can also be called *exoteric* (Jansen 1959), meaning folklore about another group: as in white American folklore *about* African Americans and vice-versa, student folklore *about* professors, Sephardic folklore *about* Polish or German Jews, and so on. Exoteric folklore reveals outsider conceptions and outsider ideas about the culture and values of a different group and is often stereotypical. Most of the rumors and legends cited in this essay are examples of *exoteric Jewish folklore*: that is, folklore *about* Jews that circulates within non-Jewish groups. Prominent historic examples would be blood libels, well poisonings, and conspiracy theories, such as claims regarding the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.<sup>2</sup> A more recent example is the belief that four thousand Israelis who worked for companies in the World Trade Center did not show up for work on September 11, 2001, because they knew of the coming attack (Fine and Ellis 2010, 59–66; Mikkelson 2001). The material in this essay focuses on the State of Israel, and the legends are contemporary, related

during the past twenty years, one as recently as 2022. Further, they all address the ongoing conflict between Israel and its Middle East neighbors.

Second, I will clarify my terms. Rather than engaging the debate about the difference between legends and rumors, I will use the terms interchangeably most of the time, preferring *legend* when the narrative element of the text at hand is more coherent and developed and *rumor* when the narrative element is weaker. I agree with Fine and Ellis, who write that “it is impossible to maintain a clear distinction between rumor and legend” (2010, 5). One way around this problem would have been to refer to all the texts with the less genre-oriented term “belief narratives” (Valk 2021), but the narrative element in many of the texts presented here is usually minimal, and actual belief in them by their narrators is sometimes questionable. In this study both “legend” and “rumor” refer to short narratives or beliefs about actions apparently assumed by some of their disseminators to have taken place or related as if they had actually occurred.

With this background in mind, I would like to consider the relatively recent exoteric narratives about Israel and Jewish Israelis that I introduced above—stories about spy animals, attack animals, and attempted mass poisonings. These legends and rumors have not attracted attention in academic circles before. Beyond the questions they raise about narrative and belief, they need to be discussed because they promote negative ideas about Jews that are familiar from historical anti-semitic folklore. They level old allegations against Jewish Israelis via new motifs, and they require scrutiny.

First, I will provide examples and summarize the claims of the three groups of rumors and legends—bird spies, attack animals, and mass poisonings. Next, I will examine both what makes these narratives unbelievable for some and believable for others. This analysis leads to a consideration of disingenuous belief (“unbelieved legends”), the manipulation of belief, and the ambiguity of belief to the point where the line between legend and joke (legend as satire) becomes blurred. My discussion concludes with the recognition that stereotypes and accusations in Middle Eastern legends and rumors about Jews, though they may have new storylines and motifs, are remarkably consistent with age-old European legends and rumors of Jewish threats.

## Spy Animals

The most widespread rumor, one example of which is reported above, asserts that Israelis have implanted various birds with electronic equipment to spy on either Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, or Turkey. Here is another example, with a much larger bird, reported in 2012, the same year as the European bee-eater “spy” was found in Turkey:

### *“Vulture Spying for Israel” Caught in Sudan*

Officials in Sudan say they have captured an electronically-tagged vulture suspected of being dispatched by Israel on a spying mission. The avian discovery was made in Kereinek, a town in the Darfur region of western Sudan. . . . Sudanese officials are said to have concluded that the bird was a secret agent after discovering it was fitted with GPS and solar-powered equipment capable of broadcasting images via satellite, according to Haaretz newspaper, which cited an Egyptian website, El Balad.

The vulture also had a tag attached to its leg with “Israel Nature Service” and “Hebrew University, Jerusalem,” leading to accusations that it was on an Israeli surveillance mission. . . .

Israeli officials have acknowledged that the bird, which can fly up to 375 miles a day, had been tagged with Israeli equipment but insisted it was being used to study migration patterns. Ohad Hazofe, an ecologist with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, told the website Ynet that it was one of 100 vultures fitted in October with a GPS system equipped to take distance and altitude readings but not surveillance images.

“That’s the only way we knew something had happened to the bird—all of a sudden it stopped flying and started traveling on the ground,” he said. A similar discovery in Saudi Arabia last year prompted local media to report that a bird, later identified as a griffon, had been “arrested” under suspicion of spying as part of a suspected “Zionist plot.” Saudi officials later dismissed the speculation and criticized journalists for jumping to conclusions after accepting Israeli explanations that the bird was part of a migration study. (Tait 2012)

Other detained “Israeli bird spies” include a kestrel in Turkey, which was “released after officials concluded it was not actually in the employ of the Mossad” (Williams 2013); more vultures, this time in Lebanon (“Israeli ‘Spy Vulture’ Returned After Being Captured in Lebanon” 2016) and Saudi Arabia (Yaron 2011); an eagle in Lebanon and a stork in Egypt (Keating 2013); and a white pelican in Sudan (“Military Animal” 2014).

Despite the eventual admission by local authorities in these reports that the birds in question were not really spies, Hezbollah’s Al-Manar television station in Lebanon ignored retractions and asserted that “Israel has used spy birds in the past: in Saudi Arabia in 2010, in Turkey in 2012, and in Egypt, 2013, and all were found to be used as listening devices” (Okbi 2013). While the other reports made fun of the gullibility of the original discoverers of spy birds, Hezbollah promoted the debunked bird-spy stories as true, verified instances of Israeli spying, perhaps refueling earlier rumors.

It is worth noting that animal spy rumors have targeted the United States and other Western powers as well as Israel (for the fourteen spy squirrels that supposedly infiltrated Iran but were arrested before they could do any harm, see Cohen 2007; for Western nuclear-spying lizards in Iran, see Hacoheh 2018).

## **Attack Animals**

Compared to the motif of the bird spy, there are fewer published rumors of attacks by Israeli-trained animals, and they seem more farfetched. The tag in Hebrew on the migrating birds provided an actual, physical connection to Israel. In other words, there was “concrete evidence”; it was merely misinterpreted. The evidence for the attack animal accusations is even weaker. But, as folklorists Gary Alan Fine and Bill Ellis write, “Motive is the worm in the apple of belief” (2010, 54). The belief in Jewish Israeli perversity seems to be unlimited, and rumors supporting this belief may not be subject to scrutiny.

One example of animal attacks concerns sharks—certainly an aggressive and terrifying animal that sometimes does attack humans, especially near beaches:



*Shark Attack in Egypt? Must Be the Work of Israeli Agents*

A recent smattering of shark attacks in the shallow waters of the Egyptian resort city Sharm El-Sheikh has visitors in a state of JAWS-like panic. The sharks (now known to be individuals of at least two different species) attacked five times over six days, killing a German tourist and severely injuring four others.

The state of panic is a fertile breeding ground for conspiracy theories. One Sharm El-Sheikh diver named Captain Mustafa Ismail believes that the sharks were trained to attack Egyptians by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad. He explained his theory to *Egypt Today* (as retold by *Ahram Online*):

When asked by the anchor how the shark entered Sharm El-Sheikh waters, he burst out, “No, it’s who let them in!” Urged to elaborate, Ismail said that he recently got a call from an Israeli diver in Eilat telling him that they captured a small shark with a GPS planted in its back, implying that the sharks were monitored to attack in Egypt’s waters only. “Why would these sharks travel 4000 km and not have any accidents until they entered Sinai waters?” asked Ismail.

When *Egypt Today* asked the region’s governor, General Abdel-Fadeel Shosha, what he thought of the theory, he said he couldn’t rule it out. It was possible, he said, that Israel was trying to undermine the Egyptian tourism industry, explains *SkyNews.com*.

Whether this was an Israeli agent in a shark costume, a specially indoctrinated Zionist shark, or a remote controlled cybershark, the general does not elaborate, but he says the theory needs investigating. (Welsh 2010)<sup>3</sup>

Egyptian authorities ultimately discredited the claim that Israel was behind the shark attacks (“Governor Absolves Israel of Shark Attacks” 2010). Nevertheless, rumors and legends often continue their oral lives in spite of, or even thanks to, official denials, like feathers scattered in the wind that can never be retrieved.

Another “attack animal” (doubling as a spy animal) that appears in anti-Israel rumors, is a camera-toting dolphin.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, Hamas claimed that Israel had

deployed a dolphin against Hamas frogmen in the sea near Gaza (“Killer Zionist dolphins? Hamas Claims They Exist” 2022). The *Jerusalem Post* reported that according to the Arabic-language Palestinian daily *Al-Quds*, “The marine mammal was ‘stripped of its will’ and turned into ‘a murderer’ by Israeli forces” (“Killer Zionist Dolphins?” 2022). In a report from seven years earlier, *Al-Quds*, as quoted by *CNN*, stressed that the dolphin is “a watery pet . . . known for his friendship with humans,” but “has [been] recruited . . . to kill Qassam Brigade Naval Commandos. . . . The Israeli security apparatus took advantage of dolphins’ love for humans, and how the animals like to play with people” (Abdelaziz 2015). The emphasis on the trust and friendliness, even love, of the dolphin makes the rumor’s message quite clear: Who but the depraved and deceptive would exploit the childlike innocence of such a creature?

Indeed, the emphasis on the innocence of animals recalls the innocence of child blood-libel victims, innocence being an essential element of both the old and the new accusations, part of the continuity between the old antisemitic legends and rumors against Jews and the new narratives that vilify Jewish Israelis. The Jew manipulates the innocent. In contrast to Hamas’s pointed emphasis on the human-friendly characteristics of the dolphin in order to denigrate Israelis, stories about the United States Navy’s use of dolphins for military purposes tend to emphasize their intelligence. After Hurricane Katrina a rumor spread that dangerous “attack-and-kill” United States Navy dolphins had gone missing in the Gulf of Mexico and might shoot divers in wetsuits with their toxic dart guns as, supposedly, they had been trained to do (Townsend 2005).

Another type of “attack animal,” wild boars, although certainly not trained, were said to have deliberately been released in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) to terrorize Palestinian farmers and destroy their crops. This rumor was spread by no less a figure than Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, who was quoted as saying, “Every night, they release wild pigs against us” (Abu Toameh and Keinon 2014). This charge seems absurd on several grounds but particularly given the recent infestation of wild boars in the Israeli city of Haifa, which is well documented in Internet-circulated videos. During the past few years, it is

no longer rare to see a mother boar with ten or more piglets in suburban Haifa in broad daylight.

At first this charge against Israelis might be dismissed as simply silly, especially given the *wildness*, after all, of wild boars and, one assumes, their inability to distinguish between Palestinian and Israeli crops. It is possible, however, that this rumor is repeated partly because it resonates with the *Judensau*, or Jew's sow, an antisemitic folklore motif common in Germany since at least the 1200s. The *Judensau* image depicted Jews in obscene relations with pigs, suckling them for instance, and thus positing a disgusting, intimate relationship between Jews and pigs. These images appeared as sculptures, carvings, and paintings in and on churches and other public places, as well as in prints (Shachar 1974).<sup>5</sup> The contemporary anti-Israeli rumor that Abbas promoted, like the enduring medieval vilification of Jews, asserts a collaborative relationship between Jews and pigs.

To the rumored release of wild pigs, we can add the rumored release of monstrous rats. According to Gil Yaron,

The Palestinian news wire Wafa reported . . . during the Intifada that Israelis were releasing giant rats in East Jerusalem. These killer rodents, “large as dogs,” were supposed to scare the locals out of their homes to leave this equally holy and contested city to the Jews (who apparently are not afraid of giant rats). (Yaron 2011)

Israelis purportedly released dangerous rats against Arabs elsewhere as well. On Jordanian television, on March 13, 2018, host Dr. Bakr Al-Abadi said,

The Zionist Entity gathered all the rats carrying the Bubonic Plague in Norway, and released them in all the Egyptian provinces near the Sinai. According to several Egyptian sources, this operation took place in 1967, and these rats still exist in very large numbers. These rats breed very quickly and cause significant harm to crops. They devour these crops very quickly, and destroy grain silos. Even children are not safe from them. These rats often

bite children's limbs. ("Jordanian TV Host Dr. Bakr Al-Abadi: Israel Released Norwegian Rats Carrying Bubonic Plague in Egypt, Develops Ebola" 2018)

In traditional antisemitic folklore, Jews are likened to rats and other vermin and are consistently associated with disease and dirt (Dundes 1997).

### **Mass Poisonings**

In rumors and legends of attempted mass poisonings, the populations of countries such as Lebanon and Egypt are threatened with deliberate poisoning via imported Israeli products. Most of these legends exist in countries that have established commercial relations with Israel, although in at least one instance, Israeli melons allegedly reach Saudi Arabia, evidently via Jordan (see text below). Obviously, trust is less than complete between these countries and Israel, and suspicion abounds; relations between Israel and Egypt, for instance, are sometimes referred to as "a cold peace." This ambiguous, uncertain situation creates fertile ground for rumor and legend.

Fresh produce figures as a vehicle through which Israel tries to destroy Arabs in some of the mass poisoning stories. One rumor in the news claimed that Israeli melons were injected with AIDS (Nahmias 2007). This news story is worth quoting because it suggests how rumors spread thanks to, rather than in spite of, new communication technologies and in the face of official denials:

"Beware of Israeli melons infected with AIDS arriving in Saudi Arabia!" is the latest rumor being spread throughout Saudi Arabia like a wildfire.

An SMS message being sent around the country this week said, "The Saudi Interior Ministry warns its citizens of a truck loaded with AIDS infected melons that Israel brought into the country via a 'ground corridor.'"

The Interior Minister's spokesman General Mansour al Turki responded to news of the message and made it clear to a-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper that the Ministry "did not issue any such announcement. This is just a rumor." . . .

Head of the center for chemicals and toxins in Mecca, Dr Ahmad Elias also stressed that there was no truth to these rumors. . . .

The rumor, despite being denied several times, has gained so much steam in the Arab world that it made it to the front page of one of the most important Arabic language newspapers.

Many received an SMS supposedly from the Saudi Interior Ministry saying, “Please forward quickly.”

In Lebanon in 2013, tomatoes once again became as suspect as when they were first imported from the Americas to Europe in the early 1500s, but for different reasons. According to *The Jerusalem Post*, stories in both the Beirut *Daily Star* and the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* reported rumors of illness caused by imported Israeli tomatoes (“Lebanese Ministry Denies Reports That Imported Israeli Tomatoes Cause Sickness” 2013). The tomatoes allegedly imported to Lebanon were said to have been injected with cancerous cells, while in Egypt the imported tomatoes were said to contain solanine, a poisonous substance. Solanine actually is a poison, but it occurs naturally in the nightshade family, including tomatoes, and is harmful only if consumed in large quantities. The Egyptian government was reported to have launched an investigation to determine whether the Israeli tomatoes contained solanine. The investigators, of course, would have found that Israeli tomatoes did contain solanine—as did their own Egyptian-grown tomatoes. As for the cancer-causing tomatoes exported from Israel to Lebanon, the Lebanese Agricultural Ministry said that there had not been any imports of Israeli tomatoes for the previous month.

However, as folklorists have established, official denials have little negative impact on the spread of rumors and legends—scholarship even less. The blood libel, after all, even though it has been refuted by a great deal of scholarship (Dundes 1991), is repeated time and again in oral stories, in speeches, in books (Tlass 1991), in the Arab and Iranian press, and even in television dramas.<sup>6</sup>

The fear aroused by imported Israeli produce recalls the fears reflected in an extensive series of legends and rumors told in the United States for decades. These

legends concerned imported products that arrived along with a host of dangerous animals—spiders, snakes, and tarantulas hidden among bananas or grapes, for example (Fine and Ellis 2010, 149–63). As folklorist and legend-expert Jan Brunvand noted, “Usually these rumors and stories concern imported or ethnic foods” (2012, 583). Since food is ingested, it has a high level of potential for symbolic as well as literal poisoning. Thus these legends appeared to dramatize the feared penetration of national boundaries by nations of strange and dangerous others. The same fear would seem to be part of the meaning of the anti-Israel poisoning legends told in the Arab world, too. In the American legends, the products were not generally thought to have been sent with the intent of purposeful harm, but the anti-Israel rumors, of course, are dominated by the idea that harm is intentional.

Rumors of threatening, imported Israeli products are not limited to food. Some rumors center on sexual threats at the literal level, but they may also carry metaphorical meanings that have to do with destruction, even genocide. For example, one rumor reported from Egypt claimed that an imported Israeli hair product for both men and women was designed to “harm Egyptian fertility” (Nahmias 2011).<sup>7</sup> Another rumor asserted the corruption of Arab youth through covert sexual stimulation: Israeli agents were allegedly “distributing libido-increasing chewing gum in the [Gaza] Strip. A Hamas police spokesman in the Gaza Strip Islam Shahwan claimed Monday that Israeli intelligence operatives are attempting to ‘destroy’ the young generation by distributing such materials in the coastal enclave” (Waked 2009). These kinds of charges are not new. Folklorist Alan Dundes, for instance, refers to the stereotypical figure of the Jew “possessing heightened sexual appetites” (1997, 106).<sup>8</sup> The Jew’s corrupting influence and his excessive, prurient interest in sex is another time-worn trope of antisemitic folklore brought to life with rumors like these.

These poisoning legends also manifest other continuities with older antisemitic folklore. They echo accusations of well poisonings that were leveled against Jews in Europe from medieval times onward, typically when plagues struck (Barzilay 2022). Like animal spy and animal attack rumors, poisoning rumors assert the perversity, treacherousness, underhandedness, and secrecy of the not-to-be-trusted Jewish Israeli foe. The fear of poisoning by Israelis even appears in a

personal memory from the 1967 Six-Day War, in which the offer of food by Israeli soldiers was rejected by a hungry Palestinian family because they feared they would be poisoned (Plotkin 2021, 9). Plotkin also associates feared poisonings like this one with European medieval accusations of Jews poisoning water sources (2021, 40).

I suspect that there are more poisoning rumors, especially with increasing trade between Arab nations and Israel, and due to the latent antisemitic motif of Jews as poisoners, beginning with the poisoning of wells in medieval Europe. Rumors like these, the Judensau, and blood libels have been called “diving rumors.” That is, like a diver, they appear on the surface but then dive under only to reappear once again in another spot after they had seemingly disappeared (Fine and Ellis 2010, 149).

### **Credibility and Credulity**

My first reaction to these legends and rumors was to think that they were too absurd, illogical, and impossible for anyone to believe. They were “unbelievable legends” in the literal sense. In fact, I doubted they were believed and thought they might be labeled “unbelieved legends,” an ironic reversal because folklorists once defined legends as narratives that were believed by their tellers to be true. Maybe what I had come across was not so complicated after all but simply the work of cynical journalists, officials, and politicians who did not believe these rumors but had intentionally chosen to spread disinformation, propaganda, and fake news in order to manipulate public opinion, something that has become all too familiar in recent years.<sup>9</sup>

But in the end my question, “How can anyone believe that?” does not have a single, simple answer. Thus, as I wrote at the outset, some of my questions, now more focused, regard belief: Are these legends and rumors believable? Is there anything that gives such tendentious narratives credibility? Why or how do listeners and readers accede to their claims? What reasons might “believers” give?

First, Israel does use animals for military purposes, although such uses are not as dramatic and deceptive as the rumors depict. Gil Yaron of the *Toronto*

*Star* writes that “many animals undoubtedly serve in Israel’s army and security services: dogs sniff out bombs and alpaca help mountaineers carry their loads” (Yaron 2011).

Second, there is the reputation of the Israeli military intelligence agency (Mossad) and scientific research community for innovative action and creative thinking. Nothing in the technological military sphere seems to be beyond Israeli capacity. Actual Israeli covert operations, as Jackson Diehl writes in the *Washington Post*, “are almost as fantastic as the fantasies” (Diehl 2011).

Third, Western technology in general, in which Israel is an active partner, seems to deliver new miracles every day. To cite a cliché, science fiction yesterday is science fact today. For instance, according to Snopes.com, rumors of robotic flying insects with military applications have a basis in reality:

One of the current areas of research reportedly being undertaken in the scientific/military field is the development of micro air vehicles (MAVs), tiny flying objects intended to go places that cannot be (safely) reached by humans or other types of equipment. One of the primary military applications envisioned for MAVs is the gathering of intelligence (through the surreptitious use of cameras, microphones, or other types of sensors). (Mikkelson 2012)

An anti-Israel rumor reported as fact by Hamas claims that Israel had used MAVs that look like dragonflies in the Gaza Strip against Hamas (Christopher 2015). But this rumor merely augments reality by claiming that dragonfly drones are operational, have explosive as well as espionage capability, and have been deployed against Hamas already. The rumor is fueled by beliefs about Israeli innovation and Western technology in general, and has a foot in reality.

Other official, factual reports add to the difficulty of distinguishing between the factual and the fantastic because what they report is similar to what has already been heard in certain rumors, making the rumors seem more credible. The United States Navy has acknowledged, for instance, that it, as well as Russia and other countries, has experimented with the military use of dolphins, as I mentioned above. That acknowledgment makes the rumor about spy and killer dolphins



more credible since what the United States Navy admits to doing is not dissimilar. Another well-documented story describes how French military and Dutch police have trained eagles to take down drones in mid-flight (Selk 2017). There is no reason to doubt this news story, and yet it is actually more fantastic than the false “bird spy” story. In other words, some operational technologies are no less audacious than rumored Israeli applications. So why not believe there are bird spies and trained killer dolphins? Are they implausible given what has been acknowledged to exist?

Some Western observers attribute belief in these rumors and legends to the gullibility of Muslims. Their alleged credulity is said to be evidence of a backward, unsophisticated civilization, ill-equipped to deal with the modern world. One well-known commentator, Brett Stephens, considers such legends/rumors, specifically the Israeli spy birds and trained attack sharks, to exemplify “the debasement of the Arab mind” (quoted in Diehl 2011). Diehl adds that these legends/rumors “deserve to be mocked” (Diehl 2011).

This argument is more fully articulated by Lee Smith, a political analyst, in his article “Turkey Hawks Bird as Israeli Mossad Spy Beacon, Ruffles Feathers” (2013). Basing his thinking on the scholarship of historian and Arabist Bernard Lewis, Lee writes that these stories are believed because the Muslim world is, to a great extent, trapped in the medieval past and for the most part thinks magically not scientifically: “Hundreds of millions of Middle Eastern, African and Asian Muslims can only understand the world as a large Harry Potter set in which they will never be among the initiates, the spell-casters” (Smith 2013). According to Smith, Muslim religion, culture, and its educational system have made progress, especially progress based on science, impossibly slow.

Smith’s comments will be offensive and considered racist by some. They are over-generalizations at the least, but my purpose here is not to critique political or cultural points of view. I quote Smith because I do not think he is alone in answering the question, “How can they believe that?” with the idea that it is because their civilization and governments keep Muslims ignorant. This assumption informs the reporting of the legends in the English-language press, too, and thus is important to examine.

Smith and others do not stop to consider that millions of Americans and others in the “enlightened West” believe equally absurd and illogical narratives and rumors without having their civilization faulted. Muslims have no monopoly on the lack of logic when hearing legends and rumors. The vast folkloristic literature on legend, scholarship-based web sites such as Snopes.com (devoted to determining the objective truth or falseness of rumors and legends) and the constant debates on blogs, websites, email, and web-based journalism all testify to the human capacity and will to believe, especially when belief is motivated, despite the absence of logic and the presence of obvious contradictions. Listeners and readers may not subject accounts to scrutiny if they are recounted skillfully and play on auditors’ and readers’ biases. In the face of blood libels, for instance, it has never availed Jews to point out that Jewish law and practice scrupulously prohibit contact with blood. Blood libels are not based on logic or knowledge; they are dramatic, and belief in them is motivated, emotional, and confirmed through prejudice. Logic is suppressed through rhetoric.

### **Legend Rhetoric: Disbelief, Manipulation of Belief, Incredulity**

Recounting a legend skillfully usually means utilizing “the rhetoric of truth” (Oring 2008). Aristotelian in nature, the rhetoric of truth works to convince the audience of the legend’s truth. The legends and rumors reported above exhibit elements of this rhetoric. The rhetoric of truth deploys an arsenal of tools, among them the use of real details within the story to establish the seeming truth of the narrative itself. Concrete elements in the legend/rumor text transfer their reality to the claims of the story, making the outlandish believable. Thus, the rumor/legends cited above refer not to some generalized place where events occurred but to real, identifiable places on the map—“Kereinek, a town in the Darfur region of western Sudan,” Sharm El-Sheik in Egypt, and Gaziantep in Turkey. The narratives cite specific details such as the types of birds—European bee-eater, griffon, vulture—an unusually large nostril on a bird, a GPS device implanted in the back of a shark. Physical details make the story more believable because they are concrete and can be visualized.

The testimony of named experts or authorities as believable witnesses—such as Captain Mustafa Ismail and General Abdel-Fadeel Shosha in Egypt, Hamas police spokesman Islam Shahwan in Gaza, the Saudi Interior Ministry—is another rhetorical technique used to establish veracity. Notice that these “experts” have titles—“Captain,” “General,” “police spokesman,” “the Saudi Interior Ministry”—lending credence to the reliability of their testimony (even though one has no idea who they actually are or the value of their titles, let alone their testimony).

Another rhetorical element adding to the sense of reality of these legends and rumors is the fact that they have a basis in some real phenomenon—birds do cross national boundaries, sharks do attack humans, and wild boars thrive in the Galilee. Egypt and Lebanon are engaged in commerce with Israel. The basis in real phenomena adds to the legend/rumor’s plausibility. The successful deployment of “the rhetoric of truth” prevents us from asking logical questions.

If, on the one hand, some listeners believe rumors and legends as a result of legend rhetoric and their own will to believe; on the other hand, the tellers of legends and rumors do not necessarily believe in the stories they themselves spread. Nor does the publicity given these anti-Israel legends and rumors in the Western media—where they are debunked—prove that they are widely believed in the countries in which they originated (although the writers in the Western media would like readers to think so). In fact, legends are diffused by those who do not believe them, not only by those who do. As Fine and Ellis write, “Some surveys suggest—surprisingly—that skeptics are more likely to pass on legends than true believers” (2010, 4–5). Thus, as I noted above, anti-Israel rumors and legends are sometimes promoted for propagandistic reasons by the same state-controlled and party media that have long been in the business of demonizing Israel.<sup>10</sup> Other cynical manipulations of credulous publics by rumor during hostilities, such as the rumor spread during the Gulf War in 1990, claimed that Iraqi soldiers had removed hundreds of premature babies from their incubators in Kuwaiti hospitals and had then taken the incubators for use in Iraq, causing the Kuwaiti babies to die. This story, broadcast nationally in the United States through news organizations such as National Public Radio, turned out to be the concoction of an American public relations firm hired by the Kuwaiti royal family to win the support and sympathy

of Americans for intervention in the war (Fine and Ellis 2010, 6). Propaganda in the form of legends and rumors works best when it plays on predispositions and prejudices, on folk belief and worldview, particularly in situations of uncertainty.

The contemporary legends and rumors spotlighted here seem to follow the propagandistic strategy of seizing upon rumors that have arisen spontaneously, so to speak, or else concocting them, and then diffusing them among potential believers through the domestic media. This type of subterfuge is easier to carry out in countries without a free press—although it can obviously be done in countries with a free press, too, as the example from the Gulf War shows. The growth of electronic media since the Gulf War has made it easier than ever to spread legends and rumors in the West.

One might also wonder—even if the populace at large in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt, and Iran does not know about the process of tagging birds to study migration—can professional journalists be equally unschooled? In other words, if, for the sake of argument, Lee Smith is correct in his assessment of widespread ignorance of science in Muslim countries, can that assessment realistically be applied to journalists and officials, who are part of the educated elite? Does it not seem more likely that they are setting their knowledge aside to follow a nationalistic, propagandistic strategy? If so, their actions reveal a cynical attitude toward their own audience and compatriots since, recognizing the falseness of these stories, journalists and officials would have to know that they are cultivating ignorance.

Thus, the claims of these rumors may be just as absurd to those who encourage and spread them as they are to Westerners, but these journalists and politicians nevertheless appear to be willing to use their authority to promote the credibility of outlandish claims. If this explanation is correct, the situation is actually worse than the widespread ignorance asserted by Lee Smith. Ignorance may be remedied by education; willful persistence in falsehood by a country's authorities has no known antidote.

Can the same questions be asked about the work of Western journalists? Have they made up, misrepresented, or willfully exaggerated rumors they claim were reported by Arab, Iranian, and Turkish journalists and government officials in

order to advance a different agenda? It seems unlikely to me that all these stories about rumors of weaponized animals and attempted mass poisonings were the creative work of Western journalists. That would be a conspiracy theory in itself! Multiple reports of the events in different Western news outlets confirm that stories about these topics originally appeared in the native-language media of several Middle Eastern and African countries. What I am unable to get beyond, in my indirect analysis of these rumors/legends, however, is the filter of the Western media and its biases. These biases come through in the style (which is satirical) more than in the content, which likely comes from genuine sources. Misrepresentation and exaggeration through style is what the Western media appears to have indulged in. My hope is that speakers of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish will take the next step by presenting and analyzing these and other similar rumor and legend texts in their native language media, or even better, from oral sources.

### **Beyond Propaganda and the Ambivalence of Belief**

There are other reasons besides propaganda for disseminating legends and rumors that one does not believe. To return to the blood libel, this most terrible and unfortunately long-lived allegation, which casts such a deep and heavy shadow on Jewish history, was spread at times by persons who did not believe it. The accusation that a Christian child had been slaughtered by Jews to make Passover matzah was sometimes launched in order to shift blame for the murder, death, or disappearance of the child to local Jews and to protect the guilty party. Magdalene Schultz “links the blood libel to the frequent abandonment and consequent death of children in medieval Christian society. Accusing the Jews of responsibility for the children’s deaths . . . was one way for Christians to cope with guilt feelings over how they treated their children” (Bar-Itzhak 2012, 280, citing Schultz 1991). Accusing the Jews did more than assuage guilt feelings, since the framed Jews were often murdered in ensuing pogroms, obviating the need for trials or thorough investigations. Jews, if they had not been killed in the pogrom, would not be subject to the same standards of evidence as Christian defendants, providing the real perpetrators with another level of protection from their crime. In such cases,

the belief that Jews require innocent Christian blood at Passover would have been manipulated by someone who, as the guilty party, knew quite well that no such murder had been committed by Jews. The guilty party used an exoteric belief (the belief that Jews require the blood of an innocent Christian at Passover) to bring about a desired end, in spite of their own lack of belief in the particular instance of the blood libel.<sup>11</sup> The guilty person knew the blood libel to be a false charge but acted—indeed spread it—as if it were true. This nonbelieving manipulation of a legend goes beyond the propagandistic mode of journalists and adds the shifting of guilt as a motive.

The contemporary legends and rumors I have presented also attempt to displace guilt and other negative feelings. The guilt is for the many failures of the regimes in countries like Lebanon, Egypt, and Iran not just to destroy “the Zionist entity” but to make progress on many persistent, recalcitrant, domestic problems. This is the “scapegoat theory” of history, of course, and it is a simplification. But there is a lot of truth to the idea, too. Plotkin, for instance, attributes the prominence of anti-Israeli conspiracy theories among Palestinians to their need “to justify the loss” in the 1967 Six-Day War and its “traumatic nature” for Palestinians (2021, 61). Long before the Arab defeat in the war, the blood libel also made scapegoats of Jews.

Further, rumors are rife in situations of uncertainty (such as war) and lack of control, and may attempt to reconcile contradictions, such as Israel’s small territory and quantitative inferiority alongside its vast impact in the region. The numerical predominance of the bird spy rumors in multiple and sometimes relatively distant locations (e.g., Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Turkey) may symbolically acknowledge Israel’s air superiority and attempt to exorcize it by capturing the Israeli “bird” that has invaded Arab, Turkish, and even Sudanese airspace.<sup>12</sup>

The history of blood libel accusations teaches that one should ask at least two questions regarding bad faith: Who pretends to believe legends and rumors when they do not, and why do they pretend? Put another way, what does it mean when people tell stories as true that they do not believe to be true at all? Or, as in the case of some blood libels, stories that they *know* not to be true?

Israeli writer Yuval Plotkin observes, “Epistemologically, rumors and conspiracies are fascinating genres: whoever tells them tries to understand or explain reality. But does s/he necessarily also believe in them? The answer to that is complex. . . . We must accept the possibility that the narrator’s attitude to the story is ambivalent” (2021, 12). For genres historically defined as asserting a truth and still regarded as being concerned with truth, Plotkin’s statement is unsettling. But it can also be fruitful.

Taking account of the audience’s as well as the narrator’s attitude toward belief, Fine and Ellis, among others, comment that “folklorists have come to consider the audience reaction to a rumor as just as central to its meaning in context as the bare text itself” (2010, 54). For instance, persons may feel licensed to tell a story that expresses prejudice against a particular group to an audience that they know shares their prejudice. Although the story may not be believable, no one challenges it because it confirms their sentiments regardless of its literal truth. Their attitude toward the truth of the story is ambivalent: the events may not have happened, but what the events express, as far as the audience is concerned, is valid. The story about the despicable enemy is true even if it is not true.

Perhaps the legends and rumors reported here were not told “as” but “as if”—a metaphor for a feeling. That is, maybe both teller and audience do not really believe that Israelis turn birds into spies, *but they do believe that Jewish Israelis are so sneaky and manipulative* that they would do such a thing, corrupting innocent nature itself, if it were possible. Egyptian raconteurs may not necessarily think sharks can be trained to attack tourists on the beaches of Sharm El-Sheik, but instead, via rumor and legend, the rumor spreaders might be communicating that they think *it would be just like Jews to try to disrupt our economy in such an indirect, surreptitious, and brutal way*. It is much more dramatic, powerful, and satisfying to express ideas in forms such as legend and rumor than as abstract statements or propositions. Among friends one can pretend to subscribe to such stories, assenting to the ideas they express in such a satisfying way, regardless of literal belief. One purpose of many other kinds of oral narratives, such as jokes and folk tales, is not to report literal truth or provide facts but to express ideas and values that can be assented to by the group, providing consensus and confirmation for its shared

notions of the world. Perhaps legends and rumors sometimes act in the same way. The anti-Israel rumors and legends reported here might not have been examined for their logic by their auditors and readers but valued for denouncing the shared enemy and building group solidarity through agreement.

Another purpose of oral narratives is to entertain, but one would usually consider entertainment to be at the bottom of the list of functions of rumors. Is there any possibility that the bird spy rumors, if not the others, were entertainment? The defining motif of the bird spy legends and rumors is the misunderstanding of a tag on a migratory bird. However, this motif is not unique to bird spy narratives from the Middle East. A humorous North American story in which a bird tag is also misinterpreted raises the possibility that the Middle Eastern story may have sometimes been told as a joke there, too. Like their Middle Eastern counterparts, the North American mis-interpreters are locals. Their stories appear in joke books from the 1950s as funny events that supposedly happened. They are told and read for their entertainment value and for the projection of a gullible rural character-type. These humorous tales may date to a purported incident from the 1920s:

In Washington, a government survey was ordered to study the migratory habits of birds. Thousands of all species were released with metal strips attached, reading, "Notify Fish and Wild Life Division. Wash. Biol. Surv." . . . The abbreviation was changed abruptly following receipt of this penciled note from a vexed Alberta agriculturist: "Gents: I shot one of your crows last week and followed instructions attached to it. I washed it, biled it, and surved it. It was awful. You should stop trying to fool the public with things like this."  
(Cerf 1952, 66)

As the editors at Snopes.com write, "the 'Wash. Biol. Surv.' tale started out as a joke . . . one which played on the stereotype of the backwards, rural farmer as too unsophisticated to recognize the significance of a banded bird, too unschooled to interpret the designation on its band as anything but cooking instructions, and too poor to let something he'd killed go to waste by not eating it" ("Eating Crow"



1999). The example above is attributed to a farmer from Alberta; in another example, the letter comes from Arkansas.

It is not certain if this North American joke, told as true, is the ancestor of a Middle Eastern legend or if this is an instance of independent invention in another part of the world in a more serious register (legend/rumor). Whatever the case, the resemblance is more than superficial. The old joke and the new legend both turn on the same element, a stereotype: the dumb farmer, the unsophisticated, rural simpleton. It is not by accident that the character who mistakes the tag is from Arkansas (read: the Ozarks) or from rural, uncultured Alberta, and in the Middle East versions he is a villager, a farmer, or a hunter, also from the outback.

### **The Great Divide**

In sorting out belief, disbelief, and ambivalence, it is important to remember that the legends and rumors discussed here were “performed” in two different contexts: the Western-oriented, English-language press (which I read) and the local, native-language press (which I did not read). The local media versions precede the Western-oriented versions and appear to be the main source for the latter.<sup>13</sup> Of course, it is hard to interpret the stories as they appeared in the native-language press since they were only quoted and not redacted word-for-word in the Western press.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, there is no reason not to consider both sets of media performances as valid, authentic texts, as parts of the conduit of legend diffusion, each retelling formed by the particular motivations of the tellers and their desires and expectations regarding audience reception (Dégh 1993; Dégh and Vászonyi 1975).

The news stories intended for the English-speaking, Western-oriented audience debunked and mocked the legends that the writers had found in the Arabic, Iranian, and Turkish media and turned them into satire. These writers scoffed at the local tellers, and the resulting reports reinforced a stereotype of credulous, unsophisticated Muslims. The tagged-bird legends and rumors in particular, as they appeared in the English-language press, made a partial transition from legend to joke, the butt of the humor being a stereotypical rural backwoods figure similar to the character in a parallel North American joke. Rumors that may have begun

with anti-Israel, antisemitic messages in the local Middle Eastern press sometimes ended up being anti-Muslim. If, on the one hand, these stories were told in their countries of origin to reassure Arabs and other Muslims as well as Middle Eastern Christians that their views of Jewish Israelis as treacherous, deceptive, secretive, and not-to-be-trusted were accurate; on the other hand, the way these stories were reported in the West reassured Westerners that their perceptions of Arabs and Muslims as hopelessly backward, credulous, and ignorant were correct.

While this essay has dealt with exoteric *Jewish* folklore, a final example, told by Israelis about Arab terrorists, represents exoteric *Arab* folklore. In the autumn of 1971, the *ulpan* (Hebrew language class) from Kibbutz Nir David in which I was a student made a short afternoon trip to the Roman ruins of nearby Beit She'an. I recall being told not to pick up any pens or toys we might see lying on the ground because they could be bombs—booby traps intended to maim or kill civilians, especially children.<sup>15</sup> Not until I began to study folklore two years later did I question the reality of the claim and wonder if it were a wartime rumor, propaganda, or an expression of fear with no basis in reality.

In fact, there is a good deal of testimony verifying that pen bombs do exist.<sup>16</sup> My purpose in this essay, however, has not been to prove or disprove the existence of pen bombs, bird spies, attack sharks and dolphins, poisoned tomatoes and melons, booby-trap toy trucks, or even explosive teddy bears (Weiss 2006), although I believe such a goal to be worthy. It is the enemy's alleged intent to catch children's attention through their innocent desires and curiosity that makes those who manufacture and deploy these bombs, whether they are real or imaginary, perverse, treacherous, murderous, secretive, furtive monsters. I hope that nothing I have written here will mislead the reader into thinking that rumors about terrorist acts should be taken lightly. I do not mean for speculation about the meanings of the stories about events to distract anyone from the horrible suffering caused directly by such acts and indirectly by the attitudes rumors and legends may engender.

Thus, my concern has not been to prove the rumors and legends true or false but to show that speaking them expresses attitudes in addition to conveying information. People tell them for the information they contain, true, but not only for information. Whether or not any, some, or all these transgressions took place,

legends and rumors, even in the form of reasonable safety warnings, ineluctably serve to assert and confirm the depravity of the enemy. Who would create and use such weapons and devices other than truly evil beings? That is the core of this narrative type and rumor wherever it is told. Although I have focused on exoteric Jewish legends and rumors, demonizing the other through exoteric legends and rumors is universal.

The same legends, told on both sides of an invisible but perhaps equally substantial wall as the one that garners the headlines, reinforce enduring stereotypes, to the detriment of both sides. Like other narratives, they often tell us more about those who tell them than about their purported subjects. One cannot, for instance, learn about Jews from legends told about Jews by others, but one can learn about attitudes toward Jews. Likewise, Western-oriented newspaper retellings of Arab, Iranian, and Turkish rumors and legends are likely to tell more about Western attitudes than about Arabs, Iranians, and Turks. These recounted legends and rumors, like so many, are indeed protean but also illuminating. Understanding them and their rhetoric may help chip away at the great divide.

Theoretically the same negative legends and rumors can be told by any group about any other. Even the blood libel was once leveled against Christians rather than Jews (Ehrman 1976, 83). In some cases—exploding booby traps, for instance—rumors on both sides mirror the rumors of the other. But that is not always the case because the stereotype each has of the other is not the same, and so the legends and rumors that are told differ because they promote different stereotypes.

According to Zionist ideology and Jewish historiography, a major cultural break was thought to occur between the eclipse of the “old” Jew of the Diaspora and the emergence of the “new” Jew of Israel. This paradigm and the extent to which it describes reality is, of course, contested. Further, contemporary Israeli culture is complex and richly nuanced, a combination of a variety of elements from the Diaspora, from the non-Jewish world, and much that is original in Israel, generated by Israeli experience. But the legends and rumors gathered in this essay suggest that as far as antisemitic attitudes and *exoteric* views of Jews in the predominately Muslim countries of the Middle East go, there is little to no difference between the past and the present: the new Israeli Jew, the Polish Jew, the Iraqi Jew,

and so on, is considered perverse, treacherous, murderous, secretive, and furtive. He preys on the innocent, as he always has. Once Jews devoured the blood of innocent children (and they still do) and poisoned the wells of their neighbors with deadly illnesses; now they use innocent animals to prey on Arabs and Muslims and try to harm them with poisoned tomatoes and AIDS-injected melons, sterility-inducing hair products, and libido-stimulating chewing gum. A negative stereotype of Israeli Jews, remarkably consistent with the age-old stereotype of Diaspora Jews, continues to circulate in the Muslim world through a range of contemporary legends and rumors.

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### Notes

1. Also see O’Sullivan 2012.
2. By “historic” I do not mean they no longer circulate today. Unfortunately they do.
3. Also see O’Sullivan 2010.
4. Or perhaps a dolphin robot (“Iran Media Outlet: Captured ‘Mossad Dolphin’ a Robot” 2015).
5. In at least one prominent location in Germany, Wittenberg, a sculpture of the Judensau still remains in public view (Schaeffer 2020).
6. The *Wikipedia* article for “Blood Libel” states that “The Syrian TV series *Ash-Shatat* (‘The Diaspora’) depicts Jews engaging in a conspiracy to rule the world, murder Christian children, and use their blood to bake matzah” (Blood Libel, n.d.)
7. This rumor echoes conspiracy theory legends about commercial products that have circulated in the US in situations of ethnic conflict. Several rumors and legends from the

1980–1990s asserted that products targeting African Americans, such as Church’s Fried Chicken, Tropical Fantasy (a fruit drink), and Kool cigarettes had been designed to cause sterility in Black men. The American legends and rumors postulated a genocidal conspiracy among several racist American corporations, sometimes owned by, or at least sympathetic to, the Ku Klux Klan (Turner 1993).

8. Dundes’s essay, “Why is the Jew ‘Dirty?’: A Psychoanalytic Study of Anti-Semitic Folklore,” offers a brilliant analysis of some of the major tropes of antisemitic folklore. His casebook on the blood libel (*The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* [1991]) gathers fourteen historic essays on the blood libel from various points of view and includes his own psychoanalytic interpretation.

9. See the special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* (131 [2018]), entitled “Fake News: Definitions and Approaches.”

10. The debunking of these stories in the Israeli and Western free press follows a parallel propagandistic function of, if not demonizing Arabs, mocking them and laughing at their gullibility and incompetence, a humiliating treatment, nonetheless.

11. See Alexander 1987 for a specific example in which the Jewish community in Jerusalem gets framed, but the true, non-Jewish culprit is revealed.

12. For instance, Israel carried out extended, dramatic airlift operations in Sudan (“Operation Moses”) in 1984–85.

13. Other sources include statements and comments from government officials and political leaders.

14. As mentioned above, it is my hope that folklorists in Turkey, Iran, and Arab countries will investigate these and similar legends and rumors.

15. A 2008 article in the Israeli daily *Ynet News* reported that at that time, “Palestinians hid bombs inside of mundane objects. . . . Soldiers have seen booby-trapped books, egg trays, canteens, and even baby shampoo bottles. . . . Another way terrorists have chosen to disguise bombs is inside of plastic rocks” (Yehoshua 2008).

16. For instance, a World War I confidential report from the United States Department of Naval Intelligence mentions “5 large fountain pens (with galvanic-cell mechanisms)” discovered among other bombs “in the trunk of an official courier of the German Government” (*Illustrations and Descriptions of Bombs, Incendiaries and Explosives Used By the Enemy (Confidential)* 1918, 14). A 1931 *New York Times* article reported the wounding of two Fascist officials from fountain pen bombs sent by mail in Genoa, Italy (“Fountain Pen Bombs Wound 2 Genoa Fascists as Explosives Are Mailed to Forty Officials” 1931). World War II reminiscences mention encounters with or rumors of encounters with pen or parcel bombs (Perry 2003, 119, 140 note 10; Bonacina 1970, 184, as cited in Perry). A history of the experiences of a World War II bomb disposal unit includes an account of destroying a fountain pen bomb (Hudson 2012). The use of letter bombs by, among others, the so-called

“Unabomber” (Theodore Kaczynski) is well documented. Recent claims of the use of booby-trapped pens, “dolls, chewing gum, pens, [toy] trucks, combs” date from the 1979–1989 Russian war in Afghanistan (“The Afghan Child and the Bright Red Plastic Truck” 1987). The American use of cluster bombs in the Gulf War may have had similar, although apparently unintended, effects. Because these small but powerful “bomblets” looked like “white lawn darts, green baseballs, [and] orange-striped soda cans,” they proved deadly to children, since many fell to the ground unexploded only to be picked up by the unwary (“What Are Cluster Bombs?” 1999). As I write this essay, Russia is accused of using cluster bombs as well as anti-civilian booby traps in Ukraine (Schmitt 2022).

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