In this paper, I look into the mark left on the minds of contemporary Muslim commentators by the genesis of the state of Israel as exploring the ways in which they reconcile the establishment of the Jewish state with Qur’anic passages. I argue that contemporary Islamic encounter with Israel - as an indication for Jewish sovereignty on a land that used to be “Islamic” - mirrors an ambivalent attitude of tolerance and rejection. On the one hand, Qur’anic commentators developed a pragmatic, though theologically justified, approach that tolerates Israel’s presence by means of drawing on Qur’anic verses that refer to the Children of Israel. The tolerance of the presence of Israel, however, is linked to a feeling of rejection through the denunciation of the perpetuity of the Jewish state and the normalization with Israel on the ground of injustice inflicted on Muslim inhabitants by its appearance. This view of Israel’s place in Islamic thought is revealing in terms of demonstrating equivocal ways in which Muslim scholars relate to the Jewish state as reconciling Qur’anic text with its existence.

To illuminate my argument, I will limit the discussion to modern commentaries of [Q 17:104] that relates: “And We said unto the Children of Israel after him ‘Dwell in the Land; but when the promise of the hereafter comes to pass we shall bring you as a crowd gathered out of various nations.’” Although this verse comes in the context of the story of exodus where God drowned Pharaoh and his soldiers, saved the Israelites, and rewarded
them “the Land,” modern commentators apply this verse to modern days Israel. In his interpretation of [Q 17:104], Muhammad Metwali al-Sha’rawi, for instance, cast the verse in a very interesting way where he views the genesis of the Zionist idea as a manifestation of the divine will. His understanding of the ingathering of the Jews in the holy land, in fact, is that it is an idea that “God inspired them [Jewish nationalists].” The implementation of the ingathering, the interpreter explains, goes against the spill God cast on them to be scattered and unwelcomed all over the world for their transgression. If God wants to punish the Children of Israel then, why would Almighty gather them in a single place in the holy land? In his logic, God wants to punish them all without leaving anyone behind and the only way to do so on the hand of his true servants is to gather them in one place. In sum, the Zionist enterprise in the eyes of the modern commentator is nothing but a divine scheme whose sole objective is to bring Jews of Israel to their knees on the hand of God’s agents.