

## **Islamism, Antisemitism, and the political left**

### **A Democratiya Interview with Matthias Küntzel**

*Alan Johnson, Editor of Democratiya.com and Professor of Democratic Theory and Practice at Edge Hill University in the United Kingdom conducted this interview in Hamburg/Germany on May 7, 2008 and published it on May 25, 2008 in the summer 2008 issue of Democratiya. According to Paul Berman, “Democratiya has become the liveliest and most stimulating new intellectual journal on political themes in the English-speaking world. – certainly the liveliest new thing to appear on the English-speaking left in a good long time.”*

*The whole summer issue of Democratiya is available on <http://www.democratiya.com/>.*

**Alan Johnson:** *Can I begin by asking you what have been the most important personal and intellectual influences that led you to write *Jihad and Jew-Hatred*?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Born in 1955, I was politicised in the aftermath of the '68er'-era. One of the events that particularly affected me was the Palestinian terrorist attack on the Munich Olympics in 1972. It forced me to look for an explanation – how could this kind of massacre happen? As a young idealist, I wanted to believe in the good in people, which meant there could be only one possible answer: such terrorism was indeed appalling, but it had social roots, in this case in the Middle East conflict. So, as a young leftist, I took much the same attitude to Arafat and the PLO as the left I now oppose does to Hamas and Hezbollah, in the naïve belief that mass movements are

intrinsically progressive, so that terrorism can only be a response to oppression. Back then I and my friends refused to take on board the reality of Auschwitz and National Socialism at either the personal or intellectual levels.

The first event which began to slightly change my perception was the Bitburg affair of 1984. The US president Ronald Reagan and the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl led a ceremony in honour of German soldiers at Bitburg cemetery, including at the gravestones of SS soldiers. I was at that time a senior advisor to the German Green Party's parliamentary fraction in Bonn and was shocked by the antisemitic comments in major German papers against those Jewish organizations which vehemently criticised the event. The reaction of the German left was also revealing. On the very same day as Jews came from all over Europe to demonstrate at Bitburg against this insult, the West German left preferred to participate in an anti-American demonstration at Bonn.

In the aftermath of this experience a Jewish intellectual in America, Moishe Postone, wrote an angry 'Letter to the West German Left'. Postone had studied in Frankfurt and had many friends there. He told us that 'there are actually only two choices: an ultimate reconciliation with the German past, or a consistent break with it' and that 'the German Left that considers itself opposed to the existing order, in a sense replicates that order by being incapable of dealing with the past.' This letter, which I translated and published for the first time at the start of the 1990s, convinced me and had a strong influence on me.

Postone was, of course, right. We were completely incapable of providing an even halfway adequate response to the continuing impact of the crimes against the Jews. Here's an example from my own life: as a left-wing German you do not normally meet Jewish people. But when I was in New York City in 1983 I started to chat to a young woman on a bus. I said 'I'm from Germany'. She said 'I am Jewish'. This sentence must have struck me like a blow. The

only thing I could find to say after a rather long silence was to ask her why Israel dealt so harshly with the Palestinians.

It was years before I realised what must have been taking place within me at that instant. When she said 'I am Jewish' I felt I had to defend myself. And in defending myself, my subconscious was that of an antisemite, connecting this young American woman with a kind of Jewish conspiracy, as if she was responsible for everything Israel was doing. Everything happened in my mind without reflection of course, it was spontaneous. Jewish people to whom I told this little story always agreed that this happens to them quite often, especially with German left-wingers.

The second event was the unification of Germany. This compelled us to rethink our whole political approach. Until that time we had tried to strengthen the left-wing of every social movement. But now we faced a kind of nationalist and sometimes even racist mass movement that we could not influence 'from the left', but only reject. When Germany won the European Football Championships in the same year as unification, in 1990, well, it was not a lovely night for foreign people in Hamburg. This kind of spontaneous and overloaded nationalism was something frightening.

On the one hand, this experience sparked a renewed interest in critical theory and accelerated the abandonment of collectivist ideologies, while on the other it stimulated a more intensive engagement with the German past. While the mainstream German left continued to fight mainly the United States and 'the West' we tried to say 'well, let's look at *German* history first and worry about the elements of continuity'. This was the beginning of a movement that would later be called 'the anti-German Left'. This term was provocative enough to spark a necessary debate. But otherwise this term is misleading. After all, the antisemites in Poland and the Czech Republic call themselves 'anti-German'. The emergence of this current, however, is the reason that today there is a more developed debate about antisemitism within the German left than within the left of other countries in Europe.

A third important watershed for me and my friends was Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, in 1996. This book, we felt, provided a big chance, after unification, to really deal with the history of the Holocaust and do what the West German left had never done, with all its talk of 'well, it was about capitalism and the ruling class', and 'the masses were not so bad'.

We dealt critically with Goldhagen but we considered his book at the same time to be a kind of treasure trove: You could open it and find a lot of most important discoveries. For example, his discussion of the German conception of 'work', which is quite different to the British conception of work as laid down in Richard Biernacki's *The Fabrication of Labour* of 1995. Thus, with Goldhagen's help, we began to understand the antisemitic meanings of the term 'German work' versus 'Jewish' non-work.

But the German left ignored Goldhagen's book or, even worse, denounced it. My friends and I asked why this was and so we wrote a book of our own, *Goldhagen and the German Left*. Here we offer two main explanations for this failure of the left. First, there is the personal and psychological connection of Germans to the Nazi perpetrators and bystanders – to our own ancestors, to our fathers and grandfathers and to our mothers and Grandmas – which I already mentioned. Second, German emigrants during the Forties tended to say 'well, the German people are OK and only Hitler and his clique is bad'. During those years, only a tiny minority of exiled communists and socialists – such as the 'Fight for Freedom' group in the UK – spoke out and told the truth: that German masses had also been infected by Nazi ideology. These German emigrants' estimation was correct. They nevertheless found themselves thrown out of the trade unions and the Social Democrat and Communist parties and denounced as 'Vansittardists'. After 1945 this tendency was forgotten. Instead, those delusionists who pretended that the German masses were always progressive went on to form the left in Germany after 1945. This 1996 book of ours was the first big break with the German left.

Then 9/11 happened. The little group which had produced *Goldhagen and the German Left* met that very day, by accident. At this meeting it was clear to us that this attack had an antisemitic connotation. There was the symbolism of New York as a so-called centre of Jewry and of modernity and the wave of suicide attacks in Israel during that summer. On 9/12 I began my research for the book *Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11*.

## **PART 1: ISLAMISM AND NAZISM: DISCUSSING JIHAD AND JEW-HATRED**

**Alan Johnson:** *Let's talk about that book. What is its central thesis?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** The basic argument is that Islamism is a modern movement which came into being as a reaction to the spread of modernity within parts of the Muslim world and a revolutionary movement with antisemitism as one of the central features of its ideology. During the Thirties and Forties, Islamist anti-modernism was poisoned by the Nazi antisemitic mind-set. Today it provides a kind of fascist alternative to capitalism. It is therefore a tragedy that so many on the left who are supposed to be anti-fascist show sympathy for or even approval of this kind of Islamist movement.

**Alan Johnson:** *You have written that 'the separation from and hatred of the Jews began of course with Mohammad's activities in Medina and is a constitutive element of Islam.' But in your view modern Islamist antisemitism is radically different from what you see as the anti-Judaism of the foundational texts of Islam – the Koran and Hadith. I was struck by one phrase of yours, which I'd like you to unpack for the reader: 'Mediaeval Jew-hatred considered everything Jewish to be evil. Modern antisemitism, on the other hand, deems all "evil" to be Jewish.' What do you mean?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** In his book of 1971 *The Event of the Qur'an: Islam in its Scripture*, Kenneth Cragg observed that the early Muslim archetypes of the

Jews were 'the most abiding and massive example of an identity discovered out of an antipathy'. Hence Islam's most important self-formulation emerged by virtue of the Jews' very resistance to Muhammad's revelation. That is why the Koran contains so many anti-Jewish diatribes. There are also a few pro-Jewish verses there. The early Meccan verses are pro-Jewish. The later Medinan verses are aggressively against Jews. The picture of the Jew in Islam, however, is different to the picture of a Jew in Christianity. The founding myth of Christianity is that the Jews were so powerful that they were able to kill God's only son. In Islam the Prophet kills the Jews rather than the Jews killing the Prophet. So in Islam Jews were denounced and downgraded and ridiculed. This was the main feature of Koranic anti-Judaism.

Modern antisemitism, by contrast, tried to give a simple explanation of the contradictions in the world. It identifies capitalism, modernism and democracy – all understood as degenerate, anti-human and sacrilegious – with Jewish influence. This is the very topic of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion – an identification of Jewish influence with modernity. Equality, women's rights, the party system and disputes between parties – all of this degeneracy is associated with the Jews, and interpreted as a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world.

In the one case you downgrade Jews: every Jew is evil. You subject them to dhimmitude and act as their masters. In the other case, if you believe that Jews are the root cause of all the wars and contradictions of modernity, then all evil is Jewish. And if all evil is Jewish then the Jews must be killed to save the world. It is in my opinion vitally important to see this difference.

**Alan Johnson:** *You point out that in Egypt in 1925 'the Jews were an accepted and protected part of public life' with members of parliament, employed at the Royal Palace and with important positions in economics and politics'. Yet 'within a quarter of a century that was all gone'. You explain this profound caesura in the Jewish experience in the Middle East by looking at the period 1925-1945, when an intimate relationship developed between*

*European totalitarian ideologies and movements, specifically Nazism, and a rising modern Islamism in the Middle East, in Egypt in particular, in the shape of the Muslim Brotherhood. What was the Muslim Brotherhood, why did it emerge, and what did it stand for?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** The Muslim Brotherhood was created in 1928 and became the very first revolutionary movement of Islam rooted in the cities. It rejected the quietism of the Wahhabites, who didn't want to see any Europeans, let alone confront them. The Muslim Brotherhood shared some ideological features with the Wahhabites. Both were 'Salafists' wishing to 'return' to the ways of Muhammad and the companions. But the differences are important. The Muslim Brotherhood wanted to change the world by interpreting Jihad in a way which had been almost absent from Islamic education before their foundation: to fight a holy struggle against the West immediately.

You can't disconnect the appearance of the Muslim Brotherhood from Fascism and National Socialism, which emerged at the same time. All these movements were in some way or other connected to the crises in the aftermath of the First World War, and to the general dissatisfaction with modern times. Each of these movements opposed modernity in its own way of course, but each deployed modern means of propaganda allied to a secret apparatus and terror.

I nevertheless avoid the term 'Islamofascism' because it is not exact enough. It might have some use as an agitational slogan, but if I want to be precise I have to say their characteristics are not identical. Fascism and National Socialism were based on European developments, and were reactions to, indeed rejections of, the French Revolution. In contrast only a very thin cover of modernity existed in Egypt. The ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood was based on ancient interpretations of life – consider the subjugation of women in Islamism. The Muslim Brotherhood's ideology is a modern declaration of war mixed with the archaic hallmarks of a desert religion. You won't find this type of archaic subjugation of women in European totalitarianism. And, at

the same time, Islamism is not influenced by social Darwinism as Nazism was. The Islamists hate Darwin! They say Darwin was a Jew who tried to overcome the holy scriptures. That is why they are not biological racists like the Nazis. They feel no need to eradicate every drop of 'Jewish blood'.

In the book I try to differentiate between National Socialism and Islamism and between the racist type of antisemitism of the Nazis which sought the death of every Jewish baby, and the Jew-Hatred of the Muslim Brotherhood.

**Alan Johnson:** *How important is anti-sensualism and fear of the woman to Islamism? You have written:*

*At the forefront of the Brotherhood's efforts lay the struggle against all the sensual and 'materialistic' temptations of the capitalist and communist world. At the tender age of 13, the pubescent al-Banna had founded a 'Society for the Prevention of the Forbidden' [8] and this is in essence what the Brothers were and are – a community of male zealots, whose primary concern is to prevent all the sensual and sexual sins forbidden according to their interpretation of the Koran. Their signature was most clearly apparent when they periodically reduced their local night clubs, brothels and cinemas – constantly identified with Jewish influence – to ashes.*

*These are not just historical questions. When UK terrorists were secretly recorded by MI5 discussing the bombing of the biggest nightclub in central London in 2004, the agents heard Jawad Akbar say that 'no one can even turn round and say, "Oh, they were innocent"' because the dead, in his view, would be just 'slags dancing around'. What's going on with Islamism and desire and the body, and is this a central or a peripheral question, in your view?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** I think it's a central aspect. It's very hard to analyse Islamism without resorting to sexual psychology. I talk in my book about the inability of the Muslim Brotherhood to accept 'the Other' or 'Otherness'. And this refusal always begins with the relationship between men and women. If

you do not properly subjugate your wife and women you can't be an Islamist, because in that case you would be accepting the other as an equal. And this is seen as being against the Koran and the holy scriptures.

The Charter of Hamas is most interesting when it comes to the role of women. They say women are important because they are needed to raise Jihad warriors. This is supposed to be their main function. And they add that the West wants to influence Muslim women by printing journals with nasty pictures and whispering wrong ideas. So every Muslim woman who likes modernity is framed as a traitor. The Islamists' perception of the woman – their refusal to deal with otherness as something equal – is at the very core of Islamism and antisemitism.

When male Hamas members murdered a young couple who two days before their marriage had dared to walk hand in hand on the shore of the Gaza Strip, they took the women's dead body and beat it frenziedly. This was the only way they could touch a woman's body – with sticks and with aggression. We are talking about a kind of inner prison, and it has a great impact. Islamist males first have to suppress their own needs and desires. There is a connection between killing your own desires internally and then extending this murderous activity externally against the 'sin' or 'sinner' that constantly inflames your desire.

### Bridges between early Islamism and late Nazism

**Alan Johnson:** *In your book you show that from the 1930s to the mid 1940s there was a growth of 'personal contacts and ideological affinities between early Islamism and late Nazism'. Let's talk about two people who acted as bridges between an older, doctrinal or Koranic anti-Judaism and a modern political and Islamist antisemitism, influenced by Nazism: Haj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, and Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. First, who was Haj Amin al-Husseini and what was his central achievement?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** The main achievement of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, was to combine the Jew-hatred of ancient Islam with modern antisemitism into a new and persuasive rhetoric. I discovered a speech he gave in 1937 with the title, 'Jewry and Islam'. Here, he intermingled modern antisemitism with the stories of very early Islam, going back and forth from the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and connecting both kinds of Jew-hatred. This was something new.

When Churchill visited Jerusalem in March 1921, just before the British Mandate, he was given a petition by the then Palestinian leadership which was very antisemitic. But it was a purely European antisemitism – about the alleged Jewish responsibility for the First World War, about how later Jews incited the Russian Revolution and so on. It was ridiculous and no Muslim of that time would have been able to understand any of this, because it was really a précis of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion! This was not the way to mobilise the Arab masses. It was the Mufti who realised this. He was always a special case in this regard. High ranking Muslims at this time rarely wanted to mobilise masses, but Haj Amin al-Husseini did. Indeed it was a mass mobilisation that in 1921 led to his appointment as Mufti, against other Jerusalem notables.

Here was a modern feature – the mobilisation of masses to rescue your position. To this end he invented a form of Islamic antisemitism which was able to reach the illiterate masses by recruiting their religious feelings and by repeating the anti-Jewish verses from the Koran and Hadith again and again. Thus, we find for the first time in about 100 years the famous Hadith about the stones and the trees that want to kill Jews – a Hadith which constitutes today a part of the Hamas Charter – mentioned in the Mufti's speech of 1937.

The Mufti was the most important founder of modern Islamic antisemitism and this achievement – with all its after-effects – is more important than his role during the Nazi time. Amin el-Husseini is often reduced to this time. But I think that what he did before and after this period of time was much more

important. Before, he created the new antisemitic rhetoric, the rhetoric the Islamists would spread. Between 1946 and 1948, he played a key role in mobilising the Arab world against Israel. Sometimes individuals can change a lot, and the Mufti was by far the best-known representative of the Muslim world at that time, among other things because of his broadcasting of pro-Nazi and antisemitic sermons into the Middle East during the war over the Berlin short wave transmitter. He pursued his passion after May 8, 1945 and stirred up a specifically antisemitic hatred against the Jews in Palestine and Israel.

**Alan Johnson:** *Yet this was the very period when the Nazi camps were discovered, and so Jewish powerlessness was plain to see.*

**Matthias Küntzel:** This was obvious to anyone *not* infected by the antisemitic virus. To understand what happened in the Middle East between 1946 and 1948, we have to enter as deeply into the Muslim Brotherhood's antisemitic mental universe as Daniel Goldhagen did into that of the German perpetrators of the Holocaust. Specialist works, such as Jeffrey Herf's great book of 2006, *The Jewish Enemy*, show that the Nazis, the Mufti and the Muslim Brotherhood were convinced, really convinced, that the American and British governments were controlled by Jews. For them, the Jews 'stood behind World War II, where they collected immense benefits from trading with war materials', as the charter of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine (i.e. Hamas) tells us. The Holocaust, in that perception, was a counter-measure that was not radical enough. Having won the war, the 'Jews' then 'inspired the establishment of the United Nations ... in order to rule the world by their intermediary' (Hamas Charter, Article 22) and partitioned Palestine. Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan al-Banna believed that the partition proposal was a Jewish conspiracy. If you think the Jews are the root of all evil everything looks very very different.

**Alan Johnson:** *The Muslim Brotherhood was formed in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. You have compared the role of the Brotherhood in the history of Islamism to that of the Bolshevik party in communism: 'It was and*

*remains to this day the ideological reference point and organizational core for all later Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda and Hamas or the group around Sidique Khan'. But what exactly is your claim about the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nazis? In what ways did the Nazis influence the Muslim Brotherhood?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** National Socialism was neither the founder nor the puppet master of the Muslim Brotherhood but supported the burgeoning Islamist movement financially and ideologically. The Brotherhood was always a real religious movement. Its founder, Hassan al-Banna, never acknowledged Hitler to be a world leader, simply because Hitler was not a Muslim. He always felt himself superior. He was a proud religious leader while the Mufti was hardly religious at all. When he lived for four years in Berlin we don't have evidence that he prayed even once in a Mosque.

**Alan Johnson:** *The next key figure in this process of melding an older textual anti-Judaism and a modern political radical antisemitism was Sayyid Qutb. What was his significance?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Sayyid Qutb personified the radicalisation of Islamism. Qutb wanted to kill every Muslim ruler who differed from his interpretation of the Koran. Qutb invented the concept of jahiliyya which means that the whole world is now at the same stage as it was before Muhammad. Qutb wrote the antisemitic tract 'Our Struggle Against the Jews' in which he considers every modernised Muslim to be an agent of the Jews. There is much more straightforward racism in Qutb's form of thought. His writing became most influential via the Saudis. His brother Muhammad Qutb went to Saudi Arabia and spread his brother's writings from Jiddah all over the world. The Saudi ruler supported Qutb's ideas against Egypt's alleged deviation.

**Alan Johnson:** *Let me ask you about Hamas. We are encouraged by many to 'engage' with Hamas. How does your book help us understand Hamas? Is*

*Hamas a rational actor with negotiable demands? Should we take its murderously antisemitic Charter seriously? Do they believe their own Charter?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Hamas are extremely rational and extremely irrational at the same time. Their means and methods of dealing with the West are quite rational. They use 'instrumental reason' as Max Horkheimer would have put it. They know how to spread their ideas. But their ideas, their mind-set, are driven by religious feelings and the perception of a religious holy war. They are the most radical enemies of the western way of living which they equate with Jewish influence. They would never accept modernity in the way we do – founded on the dignity and independence of the individual human being. Islamists not only say but believe that only Allah can rule, make laws and possess truth. History shows that the strong belief in this kind of ideology is a powerful force that might effect devastating consequences.

**Alan Johnson:** *Might we compare that kind of belief to what Goldhagen calls the 'hallucinatory thinking' that Nazism rested on, and to which the Nazis allied the instrumental reason of bureaucracy?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Well, I think every religious ideology is hallucinatory in its way. Neither the perception of a crucified Jesus ascending to heaven nor the idea of God who created the world within six days is something real. The key question is whether religious people give their founding texts a metaphorical or a literally meaning. There are fundamentalists in all religions. And all fundamentalisms exhibit hallucinatory thinking. But Islamism is the only fundamentalism which is connected to the concept of Holy War and thus constitutes a threat to mankind. They do not only declare but conduct a real war against their own people and against everyone who wants to enjoy the achievements of modernity.

## **PART 2: RESPONDING TO THE CRITICS OF JIHAD AND JEW-HATRED**

**Alan Johnson:** *One of the most severe critics of Jihad and Jew-Hatred has been Andrew Bostom, editor of The Legacy of Jihad and author of The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism: From Sacred Texts to Solemn History (forthcoming). Bostom argues that '[Kuntzel's] conceptions of both jihad and Islamic Jew hatred are mere simulacra of these phenomena'. Let's take each in turn.*

### *Bostom's first criticism: getting 'Jihad' wrong*

*Let me put his case and you can respond. Bostom claims your book radically underplays the roots of the institution of violent jihad in classical Islam. He writes, 'Simply put, Kuntzel decided to ignore all these seamless doctrinal and historical connections between ancient Islam and modern totalitarianism, especially Nazism'. Jeffrey Goldberg, in the New York Times, also complained that you oversimplified. 'One doesn't have to be soft on Germany to believe it was organic Muslim ideas as well as Nazi ideas that led to the spread of antisemitism in the Middle East'.*

*For Bostom, Hassan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood (and associated 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb) did not invent jihad war, jihad war was not a sui generis phenomenon, and jihad war was not catalysed by Nazism. Because you do think all this, in his view, you divorce the Muslim Brotherhood from 'the sacralized Islamic institution of jihad war, with its clearly demonstrable doctrine and history spanning a nearly 14 century continuum'.*

*To support his argument Bostom cites Ibn Khaldun's (d. 1406) summary of half a millennium of Muslim jurisprudence on the question of jihad:*

*In the Muslim community, the holy war is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the [Muslim] mission and [the obligation to] convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force... The other religious groups did not have a universal mission, and the holy war was not a*

*religious duty for them, save only for purposes of defence... Islam is under an obligation to gain power over other nations.*

*According to Bostom 'Islam's foundational texts sanctioned such acts of jihad martyrdom, and held them in the highest esteem'. Indeed, '[u]nequivocal, celebratory invocations for acts of martyrdom during jihad are found in the Koran, and even more explicitly, in the canonical hadith'. For Bostom, Hassan al-Banna and Qutb 'merely reiterate what classical Islamic jurists had formulated, and Islamic dynasties (major and minor alike) had practiced continually for over a millennium'*

*How do you respond to this criticism from Bostom?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Many questions! First of all: Jeffrey Goldberg's remark is in accordance with my book: It was not in the first place the creation of Zionism or Israel but the mixture of 'organic Muslim ideas' with 'Nazi ideas that lead to the spread of antisemitism in the Middle East'. In addition, I never claimed or created the impression that the Muslim Brothers did invent jihad war and that jihad war was catalysed by Nazism. Also, my book does not divorce the Brotherhood from the sacralized institution of early Islam but lays emphasis on the fact that, as a Salafist movement, the Brotherhood leads on from these Islamic origins. Finally, I did not decide to 'ignore all these seamless doctrinal and historical connections between ancient Islam and ... Nazism'. Up to now, Bostom is the first and only historian who claims that such 'seamless connections' exist and I'll be interested to see what evidence he has for them.

Bostom bases his argument solely on Islamic doctrine without paying sufficient heed to the social reality of Islamic societies, i.e. how these societies tried to live with this doctrine. He starts off from a '14 century continuum' and asserts that the Muslim Brotherhood's fundamentalism is the normal state of affairs, its aim being to 'merely reiterate' what Islamic dynasties 'had practiced continually for over a millennium.' In doing so, he

totally ignores the hundred years of rapprochement between modernity and Islam that lasted from the 1830s to the 1930s.

In Turkey, however, or Indonesia or Iran, or even Egypt broad masses simply neglected Islamic doctrine and lived with their religion in the way Christians live with theirs – it is a part of their life, maybe very important, but they were (and mostly are) not fundamentalists. We must differentiate between different perceptions of the doctrines. If you don't, if you see the whole Islamic world in a monolithic way, you are not able to grasp the historical moment when this kind of Salafism got its roots in modern times as a reaction to the modernisation of society. And if we are not accurate in our analysis we can't overcome our enemy. Analysis – in its literal translation from the Greek – means the dissolution of a complex problem into its individual parts, not the lumping together of things which are different. Bostom, however, does not want to make a distinction between Islamism and Islam.

***Alan Johnson:** So Bostom's analytical error, in your view, can have big political consequences? There is a political pay-off in getting the story right because it directs us to work effectively against the influence of the Islamists and avoid inadvertently strengthening them?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** We just have to know against whom we are fighting. Muslims, especially female Muslims are the first victims of Islamism which is a movement that can't be beaten by the non-Muslim world alone. In my most recent book, in German, I have an appendix with only Muslim voices against Islamic antisemitism. I want to strengthen those parts of the Muslim world which struggle against Islamism, risking their lives in the process. So we have to know about the origins and shape of the danger that confronts them and us, and it's not the whole of Islam. It is Islamism.

## The sources of contemporary Islamic antisemitism

**Alan Johnson:** *Bostom's second main criticism of your book concerns the sources of contemporary antisemitism. While you stress the innovations of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Islamist movements under Nazi influences, Bostom stresses the ancient theology and the historical practice of antisemitism. Again, he cites many passages from the Koran and Hadith.*

*Regarding dhimmitude – the diminished status of Christians and Jews in Muslim lands in the period before the collapse of the caliphate after World War One – Bostom alleges that you present that social institution as a form of benevolent paternal generosity towards Christians and Jews. Bostom cites the findings of the book his mentor, Bat Ye'or, that claims to show that dhimmitude was 'a system of oppression, sanctioned by contempt and justified by the principle of inequality between Muslims and dhimmis'. How do you respond to that criticism?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** According to my book, dhimmis suffered 'severe humiliation' and were forced to behave with 'appropriate humility.' More important, however, is the fact that my study concentrates on 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in the Middle East. It analyses 'the reason, why, between 1925 and 1945, a shift in direction was effected in Egypt from a rather neutral or pro-Jewish mood to a rabidly anti-Jewish one, a shift which changed the whole Arab world and affects it to this day.' Bostom in all his papers about my book devotes not a single syllable to this. He regrettably did not to take up the challenge my book presents to his generalizing approach.

**Alan Johnson:** *I think it's important to know that Jews were members of parliament in Egypt in the 1920s and to rivet our attention to what happened between that time and the period twenty years later when all this had gone. It's important to ask what happened. And politically it is very important to ask what was new in the situation.*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Indeed. Between 1830 and 1930 there was a connection between modernity and Islam. This period produced an Egyptian constitution which abolished the Sharia law as far as public law was concerned. It produced Ataturk's reforms and the secularization of a country which used to be the centre of Islam. It is necessary to study this period of time and draw lessons about how Islam can be adapted as a religion to modernity.

**Alan Johnson:** *When I interviewed Saad Eddin Ibrahim, this was his point also. He talked of a conspiracy of silence about that period. The theocrats don't want to talk about it because it involved the tentative emergence of a secular polity in some places. The autocrats don't want to talk about it because there were competing parties and elections. He argues there is no reason for us to join in that conspiracy of silence.*

**Matthias Küntzel:** That's exactly what I feel.

### **PART 3: A NEW ELIMINATIONIST ANTISEMITISM?**

**Alan Johnson:** *Are we witnessing the rise of a new eliminationist or genocidal antisemitism in the world? You have noted the not untypical sermon given by Sheikh Muhammad Saleh Al-Munajjid, in a September 2002 at a mosque in Al-Damam, Saudi Arabia:*

*The Jews are the helpers of Satan. The Jews are the cause of the misery of the human race, together with the infidels and the other polytheists. Satan leads them to Hell and to a miserable fate.*

*When eight Jewish students were murdered in a religious school in Jerusalem in March 2008, many laughed and celebrated in the streets. Even leading religious authorities within the Muslim world espouse quite extraordinary views about Jews. Sheikh Tantawi, the current Grand Imam of Al-Azhar*

*University (the closest thing to a Muslim 'Pope') wrote a long book rationalizing Muslim Jew hatred, Banu Isra'il fi al-Koran wa al-Sunna [Jews in the Koran and the Traditions]. He argued:*

*[The] Koran describes the Jews with their own particular degenerate characteristics, i.e. killing the prophets of Allah, corrupting His words by putting them in the wrong places, consuming the people's wealth frivolously, refusal to distance themselves from the evil they do, and other ugly characteristics caused by their deep-rooted lasciviousness...only a minority of the Jews keep their word....[A]ll Jews are not the same. The good ones become Muslims, the bad ones do not. (Koran 3:113)*

*How widespread is that kind of antisemitic obsession? Is this new demonological antisemitism confined to organised Islamist groups or is becoming a popular 'common-sense'?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** This antisemitic obsession is not at all confined to organised Islamist groups. In fact let me say this: antisemitism has never been as widespread in history as it is today. During the Nazi time eliminationist antisemitism was not widespread across the world. But think about the reaction to 9/11. It was a watershed, the way 9/11 was interpreted across many parts of the world. Take the myth of the 4,000 Jews who didn't enter the World Trade Centre on that day. What does that myth, and its astonishing popularity, tell us? If you believe it, it means, first, that Israel can call upon thousands of Jews all over the world; second, that those Jews will obey the secret services of Israel like disciplined soldiers; and third, that they are happy to see their non-Jewish colleagues killed. That they knew but didn't warn their colleagues. Now, this is the kind of rumour that used to create pogroms. It's a very aggressive lie, painting the Jews as the enemies of mankind, and it was invented by Hezbollah TV in the days after 9/11. But people willing to believe it were found all over the world. People want simple explanations for things they can't explain, and 9/11 was such a thing.

But we have to distinguish between the Tantawi-Hamas antisemitism (which I call Islamic antisemitism because it is not only the Islamists who adhere to it but 'normal' leading figures of Islam, such as Tantawi as well), and hatred of Israel within the intellectual left in western countries. These two expressions of hate are not the same.

**Alan Johnson:** *What is the relationship between the two, in your opinion?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Well, that's a very good question. European thinking has been influenced by antisemitic patterns for centuries – in this regard, no criticism of Jews or Israel is *a priori* immune from antisemitic stereotypes. Contemporary anti-Zionism, in my opinion, is a kind of Trojan horse that brings a new version of antisemitic sentiment into the quarters of society which normally hate discrimination and racism. It's a Trojan horse because it seems to be aimed only against a powerful state. It's also a Trojan Horse because, in an intellectual environment that internalized the PLO version of Middle East history decades ago, people are no longer able to recognize its aggressive potential. So it's very effective.

The international left did not deal in an accurate way with the Holocaust, otherwise they would be much more alarmed by the antisemitic ideology of movements like Hamas. Thus, in defending Hamas directly or indirectly, the left plays the role of useful idiot for the Islamists. Today, hostilities against Israel result in the form of a pincer movement. On one side we have antisemites such as Ahmadinejad or Hamas who draw their 'knowledge' about Jews from the Koran and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. On the other side we have non-Jewish and Jewish fellow travellers of antisemitism in progressive Western movements and governments who take up and proliferate, albeit in muted form, the Islamists' attempts to delegitimize Israel.

#### **PART 4: TAKING AHMADINEJAD SERIOUSLY**

**Alan Johnson:** *Let's turn to Iran. In a stream of articles and lectures presented around the world, you have pleaded with us to 'take the Iranian leader's Weltanschauung [worldview] seriously as a specific outlook with its own principles and history'. You have invited us to 'look inside Ahmadinejad's fantasy world and seek to grasp the immanent logic behind his attacks, even if this involves insights which may send a shiver down the spine'. You see the regime's ideology – a 'mish-mash of Jew-hatred, Holocaust denial and Shiite death-cult messianism' – as the real context for its pursuit of nuclear weapons.*

*Let's begin with that aspect that most observers find frankly bizarre – Holocaust denial. What is the meaning and import of what you call 'this new form of Holocaust denial: creative, modern, unrestrained, and extremely self-assertive'?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** I should say first that I am convinced that they believe what they say. It's not just propaganda for their public. They are also trying to influence UN debates, suggesting that Israel should not be allowed to 'spread the lie of the Holocaust' and so on. Iran is pushing its own 'truth' within institutions. And this is little understood.

**Alan Johnson:** *Is this what you mean when you say that when it comes to Iran we must understand we are dealing with 'a phantasmagoric parallel universe in which the reality principle is constantly ignored ...the laws of reason have been excluded and all mental energy is harnessed for the cause of antisemitism'?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Exactly. Anyone who wishes to engage in a serious study of this centre of Islamism must first attempt to grasp the internal logic of this 'parallel universe'. Its main component is a particular form of Islamist epistemology. Islamists think reason is a sin. You have to believe in what God says, and reason endangers this naïve belief in God. To give you an example: No Islamist would challenge the statement in the Koran that Allah

changed Jews into apes and pigs, because everything the Koran says is true. The only permissible debate which took place in the theoretical monthly magazine of Hamas, *Falastin Al-Muslima*, is about whether the Jews who became animals are able to have offspring or not, since the Koran provides no answer to this question. Truth is not a matter of trial and error but a matter of belief.

Even on the occasion of his speech at Columbia University Ahmadinejad claimed that only the true believer is gifted by Allah with truth. Nothing else counts. Therefore the Western style of historiography is rejected as well. Therefore Islamists are able to say that Moses was 'the first Muslim', that the Holocaust is a myth and that the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam is a reality.

Secondly, there is the emotional infrastructure of antisemitism. Holocaust denial brings antisemitism to its extreme point. Holocaust deniers implicitly claim that for 60 years the Jews have lied to the world. They claim that the Jews have every academic and media post sewn up to sustain the lie in order to browbeat the world. Every denial of the Holocaust thus tacitly contains an appeal to repeat it.

**Alan Johnson:** *Western observers find it hard to judge the significance of the Iranian regime's beliefs concerning the return of the 'Twelfth Imam' and the connection of this belief to either Holocaust denial or the pursuit of the nuclear bomb. Should we take this idea seriously?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** We must take it extremely seriously. Different religions have different ideas about the Messiah. It's normally a form of metaphorical thinking about utopia – a better world in a future to come. But in the case of the special brand of Shiite Islam that Ahmadinejad and the group around Khatami represent, it's quite another story. They have transferred the abstract idea of a Messiah into a *political programme* for today. That's why it matters.

If the Mayor of Rome knocked down a quarter of the city to build a giant boulevard to prepare for the reappearance of Jesus Christ as a Messiah, I think the Italian people would remove him, maybe to the Asylum! But this is exactly what happens in Tehran. It was part of the last election campaign. Ahmadinejad won with the promise of building a boulevard for the return of the Twelfth Imam. Look, it's the first time in human history that the special threat of destruction connected to the nuclear bomb is connected to this kind of religious apocalyptic thinking. This is extremely dangerous.

**Alan Johnson:** *You recently compared the reaction to the November 2007 American National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran [which concluded Iran probably stopped the active pursuit of nuclear weapons in 2004] to 'the euphoria inspired by Chamberlain's words on Sept. 30, 1938, as he ... announced that he had achieved 'peace in our time.' Why did you make that comparison?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** People see what they want to see, and read what they want to read. Chamberlain didn't want to notice the connection between the Sudeten German question and the overall ideology of Nazism. He wanted to separate these things. The NIE also wants to separate things. It takes the view that if Iran has declared uranium enrichment to be peaceful then we should believe the regime. (There is a footnote to this effect in the report). They disconnect the question of the nuclear programme from the whole ideology. But if you look at the constitution of Iran one part says 'every means' must be used to defend and to spread Islam. There is nothing which can't be used for military means, according to the constitution of the 'Islamic Republic'. Once you disconnect the technique and tools of the nuclear programme from the ideology, you are committing the same mistake as Chamberlain did.

I read British journals from the 1930s. When Chamberlain came back, people were so happy! More important: the British reporting of Nazi Germany changed instantly. Before Munich, the press was critical of the internal workings of the Nazi regime, of how it dealt with Jews and so on. After the

huge sight of relief of Munich, they changed their reporting. Things were now seen in a brighter light. The realism faded. A rosier view emerged. Here we have one main consequence of appeasement. In order to defend the decision you have taken, you'll start to see the enemy in a new light. After the NIE, in Germany at least, Iran vanished from the headlines. When Ahmadinejad called Israel a 'dirty microbe' – without doubt the language of Julius Streicher – there was no mention in any German newspaper.

**Alan Johnson:** *Speaking of Germany, we have both been attending a conference in Berlin titled 'Business as Usual? The Iranian Regime, the holy war against Israel and the West and the German Reaction'. You are critical of Germany's stance towards sanctions against Iran, accusing it of 'departing from the Western block in order to make common cause with China and Russia against the core Western powers'. Is Germany simply subordinating all to the short-term pursuit of economic self-interest or is it more than that?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** You also have to see the position of Chancellor Angela Merkel as expressed in her recent acclaimed speech to the Knesset. At this time we can't know how serious she was when she said that we must stop Iran getting the nuclear bomb and we must learn the lessons of the Holocaust. There may be a split within the coalition, with the Foreign Ministry much more in favour of appeasement, while the Chancellor is, in her words at least, more realistic about Iran. We need to study these contradictions. I tried to do this in my recent [op-ed](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Those who view a nuclear bomb in Iran as not such a terrible thing talk about a 'strategic partnership' between Germany and Iran. They talk in big geo-strategic terms about this connection. They want a special alliance with Iran in order to enhance Germany's position and to confront American influences in this region. This kind of connection is always, at some level, directed against the West.

Our German history of being an enlightened society is not a very long one as you know. It started only in 1949. Ideological traditions on the other hand are strong. I do not exclude the possibility that talk of a new strategic partnership with Iran involves the idea of distancing Germany from the West.

**Alan Johnson:** *Where do the German Social Democrats stand on this?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** Today, there is no well-known Social Democrat who would dare to reiterate what Chancellor Merkel told the Knesset last month namely that if 'we Europeans' were to shrink from tougher sanctions in order to stop the Iranian nuclear programme, 'we would have neither understood our historical responsibilities nor developed an awareness of the challenges of our time.' This party destroyed the floodgates of resentment in 2002 when Chancellor Schröder based his election campaign on blatant anti-Americanism. German Social Democrats still consider the USA to be the main threat, not Tehran.

## **PART 5: ISRAEL AT 60**

**Alan Johnson:** *At 60 Israel finds itself insecure and demonised. It faces a fascistic Hezbollah on the Northern border, rearming and preparing a new assault. A fascistic Hamas unleashes rockets and eliminationist rhetoric from Gaza. Syria, it seems, came close to obtaining a nuclear capability with North Korea's help. Iran's leaders openly proclaim their intent to 'wipe Israel off the map' and create 'a world without Zionism', and is enriching uranium at great speed. Meanwhile world opinion is hostile to Israel, which is routinely compared to apartheid South Africa. Demands spread for a boycott of Israeli goods, or Israeli intellectuals.*

*You argue that 'the character of the Middle East conflict has fundamentally changed in the last 20 years' as 'a war of Weltanschauung and religion has emerged from a minor conflict between Palestinians and Zionists, which later*

*escalated into a larger conflict between the Israelis and the Arabs'. Can you elaborate?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** At the beginning, this conflict was a territorial dispute – perhaps until the middle of the thirties. Then it started to become a conflict between the Arab world and the Zionists, and then with Israel. During the 1980s, after the Iranian revolution, it again changed its profile and scope. The basic framework is now Islamism against the West. Israel is not the root but just the front line in this war. The Islamists tell us they want to destroy liberal democracies and free societies the world over. They are outspoken about this but the Western world prefers not to listen to what they say.

Even in his letter to President Bush, President Ahmadinejad boasted that he 'can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems.' I'm neither Jewish nor even religious. Thus I have no love affair with Israel. For me it's nevertheless quite obvious that Israel defends my freedom against Islamism and that giving support to Israel is in my self-interest.

**Alan Johnson:** *In the UK the debate has become very confused. The lecturer's trade union, the UCU, passed a resolution at its national conference that proclaimed 'criticism of Israel cannot be construed as antisemitic'. When does legitimate criticism of Israel stop and antisemitism begin?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** First of all this UCU resolution is unbelievably ridiculous. It is a historical fact that since the year 1921 there has been an antisemitic anti-Zionism in existence. Alfred Rosenberg wrote his first book against Zionism in that year, and it is completely antisemitic. Second, antisemitism has been a part of Europe for two millennia. And antisemitism is like a chameleon that changes its complexion over time as its environment changes. In such a deeply antisemitic world as Europe, it's just common sense to look for the ways in which the establishment of a Jewish state would reshape antisemitic thinking. It's logical to think that it would. In fact, it would be a kind of miracle if this were not the case!

The EU adopted a reasonable definition of antisemitism that includes the phenomenon of antisemitic anti-Zionism. It says that criticism of Israel becomes antisemitic 1) when Israeli policy is equated with Nazi practices or when symbols and images of long-established antisemitism are assigned to Israel; 2) When Israel's right to existence is denied; 3) When a double standard applies and demands are made of Israel that would never be expected or demanded of another democratic state.

For instance, it is normal for a state to defend itself against rocket attacks from outside. You must give Israel the same right. Otherwise you are dealing with Israel in the same way antisemites deal with Jews. The way the attacks on Sderot are dealt with reminds me of how attacks on European Jews were dealt with in the Middle Ages. At that time also, it was very normal that Jews got punished and beaten, but if the Jew got up the courage to defend himself it was a big scandal. Today, the big headlines only come when Israel tries to defend itself against the rockets. The rockets themselves are treated as, well, normal.

**Alan Johnson:** *Writing in the New York Times Book Review, Jeffrey Goldberg, after praising your book, complained that you had oversimplified the Israeli-Arab conflict, noting that 'Jews today have actual power in the Middle East, and Israel is not innocent of excess and cruelty.' Do you recognise any validity in Goldberg's criticism? How much responsibility does Israel bear for the failure thus far to achieve the two-state solution?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** If you go back through the history you find that there was more than one opportunity to have a two-state solution. In 1937 first, when the Zionists and the moderate Muslims in Palestine supported it. The Mufti destroyed that opening. In 1947 there was a second big chance. Again, the obstacle was the ideology that said there must be no Jewish state in any corner of the Middle East. That blocked the two-state solution proposed by the UN which the Jews and many Arab leaders (though only privately) had

accepted. And again in 2000 at Camp David the two-state solution was available but Arafat rejected it without making any kind of counter-proposal.

I expect that any Israeli government would be happy if a moderate Palestinian leadership really and seriously went for the two-state solution. Or not? The fact is that this has never happened yet. It's vital to see that the leadership of the Palestinians, until Abbas, has been dominated by the Mufti of Jerusalem and the successor he chose, Arafat. Today, with Hamas' propaganda outpourings, antisemitism in the Palestinian territories is worse than ever. It might be more realistic therefore to retreat to a 'three-state solution', with Israel within clearly defined and internationally accepted borders, Gaza as an Egyptian province and the West Bank as a part of Jordan. In such a case, the Mufti and his legacy would for the time being have robbed the Palestinians of their statehood.

**Alan Johnson:** *What are you working on now?*

**Matthias Küntzel:** I am preparing a book about the special relationship between Germany and Iran, with an emphasis on the time since the Islamist revolution.