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NAZI-GERMANY AND THE ANTISEMITISM IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

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If we want to confront antisemitism in the Muslim world we have to understand its recent history. Therefore I would like to talk about how Nazi Germany 70 years ago influenced and left its signature on this very type of antisemitism. First I would like to report some exiting new research in this field. Second I would like to share with you some thoughts about its political ramifications.

As we know, Nazi antisemitism presupposed the centuries old Christian anti-Judaism. It built on the foundations of Christian antisemitism, while at the same time hugely radicalizing it. Something similar, and this is far less well-known, happened later with regard to Islam. When from 1937 onwards the Nazis began systematically to foment Jew-hatred in the Islamic world, they built on the foundations of a centuries old Muslim anti-Judaism, while at the same time doing all they could to radicalize it.

What kind of relations did Nazi Germany cultivate with the Islamist movement that arose in the 1930s in Egypt? What methods and messages did the Nazis use to influence the thinking of many Muslims? Since 9/11, a specific field of research has developed, especially in Germany and the USA, devoted to providing clearer answers to these questions. Historical archives

are being sifted through anew, relevant academic research and film projects are under way and new discoveries are being made.

Here is an example concerning Radio Zeesen, the Nazi short-wave radio station that broadcast daily doses of antisemitism to the Islamic world for the six years between April 1939 and April 1945 in three languages: Arabic, Turkish and Persian. Many sources indicate that these broadcasts were extremely popular. Why? Firstly, they emphasized religion: Muslims were addressed as Muslims, not as Arabs. Secondly, they employed very popular broadcasters, such as the Iraqi Yunus al-Bahri or Hadj Amin, the Mufti of Jerusalem. Thirdly, the programs were professionally produced, with Arabic music and recitations from the Koran. Fourthly, the German transmitter was more powerful than those of its competitors, thus ensuring a better listening experience. And finally, the bulk of the verbal material was devoted to whipping up antisemitic hatred.

But there was something new about this antisemitism. It embodied a historically unprecedented innovation. For here early Islamic Jew-hatred was fused with the fantasy of the Jewish world conspiracy and thus radicalized. While in early Islam, with some exceptions, everything Jewish was considered evil, now everything evil was deemed Jewish: capitalism, communism, the Allied powers and moral decline. While in early Islam Jews who converted or accepted dhimmi status had a chance of survival, people now began to kill Jews, in order to “liberate” the world from all evils.

I am glad to report that research discovered new sources on the radio propaganda. Only three years ago I discovered the manuscripts of the Arabic programs for 1940 and 1941 in the Berlin Federal Archives. And, more

important, the historian Jeffrey Herf from the University of Maryland discovered the so-called “Kirk Transcripts”, named after the US ambassador to Egypt during the Second World War. The transcripts contain verbatim English translations of Nazi Germany’s Arabic language broadcasts from spring of 1942 to the end of the war which were sent to the Secretary of State in Washington from the American Embassy in Cairo every week. Jeffrey Herf will soon be presenting this material in a forthcoming book on Nazi Germany’s Arabic Language Propaganda.

I would like to offer you a short excerpt from the “Kirk Transcripts”. I am taking the following citation from the broadcast of 7 July 1942, when everybody thought that General Rommel appeared on the verge of capturing Cairo.

“According to the Moslem religion” declared the Nazi Arabic-language broadcast, “the defense of life is a duty which can only be fulfilled by annihilating the Jews. ... Kill the Jews, burn their property, destroy their stores, annihilate these base supporters of British imperialism. Your sole hope of salvation lies in annihilating the Jews before they annihilate you.”

This research by Jeffrey Herf, Klaus Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers and others contributes to a better understanding of the roots of antisemitism in the Islamic world. This is relevant not only for our understanding for the past but also because of its consequences for the contemporary discourse.

Firstly, there is the discussion among Muslims themselves: “We must discuss why we hate the Jews“, as a Saudi columnist wrote in the newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. “Without confronting the ideological roots of radical Islam it will be impossible to combat it”, adds Tawfik Hamid, a onetime member of

an Islamist terrorist group. I believe that discussing the evidence for a European contribution to this Jew-hatred will help the development of this as yet incipient discussion.

Secondly, in Europe the character of this hatred is totally misunderstood. While antisemitism from the far right occasions justified outrage, the very same antisemitism is downplayed and minimized when expressed by Muslims. While many well-meaning people condemn National Socialism as the quintessence of evil, they ignore the unmistakable identity between Nazi antisemitism and the antisemitism of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Many are inclined to excuse their hate-filled diatribes as a side effect of the Middle East conflict which, they believe, would immediately disappear if the conflict ended. I consider it of the utmost importance to challenge this false assumption and confront it with historical facts.

Thirdly, the so-called “new antisemitism” aims to remove Israel from the map under the pretense of anti-racism and anti-fascism. It might be worth to tell these so-called anti-fascists that the obvious similarity between the Hamas-Charter and Nazi antisemitism is not coincidental, but stems from the verifiable community of goals shared by Islamists and Nazis in the 1930s.

We must make it clear that one can be in favour of or against Islamism and Fascism but one cannot be anti-Fascist and pro-Islamist at the same time.

My final point relates to the self-image and self-consciousness of Israel itself. The historical record disapproves the assumption that Islamic antisemitism is *caused* by Zionism or Israeli policy. The seeds of the harvest that is now being reaped by Hisbollah and Hamas were sown seventy years ago through the mesmerizing and entertaining programs of a Nazi radio station. Thus, it

is not the escalation of the Middle East conflict that has caused antisemitism; it is rather antisemitism in the Arab and Islamic world that has caused the escalation in the Middle East – again and again.

History at the same time shows that only a particular faction among the Muslims made common cause with the Nazis. It shows that, in the thirties and forties, this pro-Nazi wing only gained the upper hand over those Muslims who disagreed through naked terrorism. Long before Israel was founded, this wing had already fallen prey to the demonizing delusions of the Nazis. Since then this wing, regardless of what Zionism has or has not done, has viewed the world through a lens with two superimposed distorting filters: that of early Islamic Jew-hatred and that of modern antisemitism.

Now, that we begin to understand how the Islamic world adopted such an uncompromising form of antisemitism we can ask by what means can this progress be reverted or undone. There are no easy answers but this is the question that we have to be asking.