

9/11 and the globalization of antisemitism

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By Matthias Küntzel

Good morning, dear friends,

My name is Matthias Küntzel, I am a non-Jewish political scientist and historian from Hamburg, Germany. 30 years ago I started to study Nazi ideology, especially antisemitic ideology, in order to understand how Auschwitz could happen and in order to understand how my own parents were able to love Hitler when they were young.

Then came 9/11. This attack took place almost exactly 21 years ago. Everyone who is old enough will be able to recall the horrifying images: the desperate faces behind the windows of the World Trade Center; the ordinary employees plunging to their deaths.

The perpetrators forced hundreds of airplane passengers to take part in their own suicide in order to immolate thousands more at their workplaces – that was indeed a monstrous, an outrageous crime. Norman Geras, the British philosopher, called it “a crime against humanity.”

So, just as I had previously sought to understand the Nazi ideology, now I wanted to understand the ideology of the Islamists. I wanted to know: what ideas propelled the group led by Mohamed Atta into action?

I got an answer when the first trial of a member of Atta’s group took place in Hamburg in 2002. I had the good fortune to know the Reuters’ journalist who attended and took notes at this trial. Let me quote what witnesses from the group told the court about Atta: “Atta’s outlook was based on a National Socialist way of thinking. [...] He considered New York to be the centre of world Jewry, which was, in his opinion, Enemy Number One.” The members of his group were convinced that the Jews had instigated the Second World War. They “believed in a Jewish world conspiracy.”

Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaida, shared this outlook. Let me quote from his “Letter to the American People” of November 2002: “The Jews have taken control of your economy through which they have taken control of your media and now control all aspects of your life, making you their servants and achieving their aims at your expense.” Here Bin Laden constructs an opposition between “evil Jews” and “good American people”. His hatred of the USA is based on the conviction that “the Jews” control the country and abuse it for their own

Jewish and Israeli ends. So we can see: although 9/11 was directed against the USA, the motivation for the action was antisemitic hatred.

But most governments, mass media and activists did not want to talk about the antisemitic dimension of 9/11. They showed no interest in the fantasy world of the perpetrators; they did not want to acknowledge the immanent logic behind their behaviour. Not even in the USA! The American official 9/11 Commission report of 2004 is a case in point. The word antisemitism does not appear in the report's section on "Bin Laden's Worldview". In the framework of the "war on terror", no specific provision was made for a struggle against the ideology that had motivated the terrorism in question.

New boost to antisemitism

The weeks and months after 9/11 showed that this omission was a big mistake. Only ten days after 9/11, Jeremy Corbyn and other veterans of Britain's radical left launched the "Stop the War Coalition", which would develop into an alliance between British Islamists and leftists. Palestinian suicide bombers were hailed as heroic freedom fighters. Extremist Muslim preachers used fiery sermons to encourage young British Muslims to aspire to jihad – not without success, as would become apparent in such events as the attack of 7 July 2005 in London, the Manchester Arena bombing of 2017 or the killing of Lee Rigby. The refusal to recognize al Qaeda's true motives resulted in a reversal of responsibility: The more deadly the terrorism, so many believed, the greater the American or Israeli or British guilt. The perpetrators were declared the victims and the victims the perpetrators.

Antisemitic conspiracy myths mushroomed. Graffiti associating the Star of David with the number 9/11 appeared in many places across Britain. The message was that Mossad had been involved in planning the attack.

The slogan "Hey USA!!! Why Did 4,000 Jews Escape from Boom?" referenced the claim that 4,000 Jews who allegedly worked in the World Trade Center did not turn up for work on 11 September because they had been forewarned of the attack. This legend, invented and circulated by the Hezbollah television station Al-Manar, reached untold millions around the world with lightning speed.

What picture of "the Jews" does such a story paint? First, it accepts the myth that Mossad will stop at nothing to damage the Arab case. Second, it suggests that 4,000 Jews in New York City would obey Mossad orders with military discipline. Third, it assumes the existence of a will to destroy the non-Jewish population, since, according to this legend, New York Jews cold-bloodedly left their non-Jewish colleagues to die.

The global spread of this hate virus marked a watershed in itself. Overnight, the fabrication of a Jewish world conspiracy had gained widespread currency as a basic interpretative framework for an event of global significance.

9/11 thus gave a new boost to antisemitism and the deadly force of the attacks rebounded first of all onto Israel. In subsequent month and years, Israel saw itself confronted not only by an escalation of Palestinian suicide bombings, but also by antisemitic mobilizations in Europe and the Arab world.

And so the attempt to ignore the Jew-hatred of the 9/11 terrorists ended in disaster: this antisemitic attack became the starting point for the globalization of antisemitism. The big question then is: why was the antisemitic dimension of 9/11 ignored? How was this possible?

One obvious answer, of course, is that at that time the London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism did not yet exist. But I would like now to take a closer look at this problem.

What prevents people, generally speaking, from acknowledging antisemitism when it arises? Why do so many want to avoid this issue? I would like to offer you three ideas of mine on the subject.

First: The problem of rationalization

I have already mentioned the American official 9/11 Commission report that ignored Osama Bin Laden's antisemitism. Instead, this document gives the wrong impression that Islamism originally arose in response to recent American and Western policies. This is a typical example of rationalization at work. Unable to make sense of the real motivation behind 9/11, the Report's bewildered authors found shelter in an idea that was familiar to them: the West is guilty. If the West had behaved differently, so goes the argument, then the attack would not have happened.

But antisemitism rejects this logic. This is not an easy thing to grasp, since we live in a world in which we automatically believe that there must be a plausible source for every problem. But this is not how antisemitism operates. Antisemitism disregards the common-sense logic of cause and effect. Think of the Shoah! We must constantly reiterate that there was not the slightest social or other plausible reason for the murder of 6 million Jews. The Nazis believed in their own delusion that the Jews were responsible for all the suffering and misery in the world. They were convinced that only the Jews' total destruction could save the world from this suffering and misery.

Their action was psychopathological; it was utterly divorced from reality. To this day, the Shoah provides us with the most convincing evidence for this special feature of antisemitism: there was and is no rational reason for it.

And this is why it is so very wrong to separate the Holocaust from antisemitism and force it into the straitjacket of the post-colonialist ideology as a so-called "intra-European colonial crime".

This brings me to the *first* of my three suggestions for the London Centre:

Holocaust awareness is central to the struggle against antisemitism. It is about remembering the murdered. But it is also and especially about our view of society and the world; about a view that does not avert its eyes from evil, but recognizes and fights it as a fact.

Anyone who does not recognize the specific horror of the Holocaust will also not be able to recognize what distinguishes antisemitism from racism. And whoever does not recognize this specific feature of antisemitism will hardly be able to develop a sensitivity to the necessity for Israel to exist as a means of self-defence for the Jews.

Back to our question: what prevents people from acknowledging antisemitism when it arises?

Second: Sparing Muslim antisemitism

Let us suppose that American Nazis had carried out a similar attack on the World Trade Center. Would governments and media have displayed the same lack of interest in the attackers' antisemitism? You will, I think, agree with me that this is inconceivable. So why is antisemitic behaviour, when engaged in by Muslims, judged differently to that of Nazis?

It is commonly said that the contemporary Jew-hatred in the Middle East has nothing to do with the historic Jew-hatred found in Europe. Some regard Muslim antisemitism as a slightly distorted form of liberation struggle by the Arabs, others excuse it as a response to the activities of the Jewish state. All agree that Israeli Jews are responsible for the antisemites' behaviour. Israel is the cause, so goes their mantra, and Jew-hatred the effect.

Any fact that might contradict this rationalizing approach is ignored. Israel's alleged guilt must not be called into question. Thus, for example, many in the academic milieu don't want to know anything about the influence of Nazi Germany on the Arab world and its after-effects. However, in this area, numerous new studies have appeared since 9/11 that demonstrate that contemporary Jew-hatred in the Middle East is intimately linked to the historic Jew-hatred of Europe; that Nazi Germany's antisemitic propaganda in the Arabic language left enduring legacies in the Middle East; that the striking similarity between contemporary anti-Jewish slogans and graphics and those of the Nazis is no accident. Too many, however, refuse to take the Islamists' Jew-hatred seriously and confront the plain meaning of what they say and write.

This leads to a further peculiarity: many of those who downplay antisemitism are finding excuses in the Middle East for what they condemn in Europe. "Are all forms of Holocaust denial the same?", asks anti-Zionist professor Gilbert Achcar, for example. "Should such [Holocaust-]denial, when it comes from oppressors, not be distinguished from the denial in the mouths of the oppressed?" Here, Achcar gives the Holocaust deniers, as long as they belong to what he considers an "oppressed group", a moral carte blanche: what would otherwise be outrageous becomes acceptable.

In my opinion it borders on racism to construct a kind of 'homo islamicus' by applying different standards to Muslims than to non-Muslims. Muslims are thus infantilized: enrolled as members of a group in need of protection, they are denied the will and critical capacity that we, as Europeans, claim for ourselves. "It is my fellow Muslims", writes Maajid Nawaz, "who suffer most from this patronizing, self-pity inspiring mollycoddling."

It goes without saying that those who fight antisemitism must also fight every form of racism, also when it is displayed by Jews in Israel or elsewhere. However, we must at the same time insist that people who claim to be fighting racism must also fight all forms of antisemitism, even when it is displayed by Muslims.

A major and acute problem

Here, however, we come up against a major and acute problem that I will illustrate through a digression.

All relevant surveys – worldwide and in Western Europe - show that antisemitic attitudes are far more prevalent among Muslims than among non-Muslims. In Germany, for example, a representative survey in May 2022 revealed that antisemitism was far more widespread among Muslims than among the general population and was especially strong among those Muslims who frequently attend mosques. While an embarrassing 23% of the general German population agreed with the proposition that Jews are too powerful, the figure rose to 49% for Muslims and to 68% among strongly religious Muslims.

Moreover, the Islamist's antisemitism is marked by an exceptional radicalism. Let us take just one example, the example of the Holocaust.

Old-style neo-Nazi groups in Europe tend to deny or minimize the Holocaust; they rarely openly justify it. But Sayyid Qutb, the most famous member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the twentieth century, justified the Shoah and described it as a divine and just punishment: "Then Allah brought Hitler to rule over them." This may be an extreme example, but such statements arouse no significant criticism or condemnation in the Arab public discourse. Moreover, they are not confined to marginal groups.

Thus, in 2009, Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qaradawi, today's leading ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, repeated Qutb's approach. His justification of the Holocaust was aired on Al-Jazeera TV: "Throughout history, Allah has imposed upon the [Jews] people who would punish them for their corruption. The last punishment was carried out by Hitler. [...] He managed to put them in their place. This was divine punishment for them. Allah willing, the next time will be at the hands of the believers". What Qaradawi hopes for is clear: The next "divine punishment" such as the Holocaust will be perpetrated by Muslims.

With this we have arrived at the current scenario, keyword Tehran. This renewed punishment of the Israeli Jews, allegedly justified on religious grounds, is what the Islamists in Teheran are preparing and propagating. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei has

described “the war on Palestine [as] a war on the existence of Islam“. He declared: “The fate of the world of Islam and the fate of all Islamic countries ... depend on the fate of Palestine.“ His conclusion is clear: “We believe that annihilation of the Israeli regime is the solution to the issue of Palestine.”

There is, of course, no rational basis for Tehran’s hatred of Israel. There are no border issues between Israel and Iran. Nor is there any refugee issue between them. Nonetheless, the Iranian regime asserts that Israel and Zionism represent an evil that must be eradicated in order to liberate humanity.

In this respect, what the Tehran regime is preparing in plain sight goes beyond 9/11:

The Revolutionary Guards boast that they “will raze the Zionist regime in less than eight minutes“. An Iranian TV Documentary “7 Minutes to Tel Aviv” shows footage of simulated attacks against key targets in Israel, including the Dimona nuclear reactor, the Knesset and business hubs. Iran’s Supreme Guide, Ali Khamenei, has stated that by 2040 at the latest Israel will no longer exist. A countdown clock in Tehran shows the number of days to go before Israel’s appointed end is supposed to come.

Western governments, however, do not take this genocidal antisemitism seriously. Why? Presumably because they are yet again in the grip of the cause-and-effect delusion and rationalize Tehran’s Jew-hatred by believing that Israel must in some way be responsible for it.

Analyzing and combatting these Iranian plans has nothing to do with “Islamophobia“, but everything to do with Theodor Adorno’s categorical imperative that we must do all in our power to ensure “that Auschwitz is never repeated, that nothing like it ever happens again.“ Many modern academics, however, avoid this issue out of fear of being labelled “anti-Arab” or “Islamophobic“. This is a serious problem; many in Western universities, fearing ostracism, do not say what they think and restrict the scope of their research. Hopefully, the London Centre can make a difference here.

In Britain itself, there are prominent Muslims who fight actively against antisemitism amongst Muslims. I hope – and this is my *second* proposal – that the London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism will support them and also encourage non-Muslim researchers to address the topic of antisemitism among Muslims with an unflinching gaze.

So back to our initial question: what prevents people from acknowledging antisemitism when it occurs? This brings me on to a final point related to Jeremy Corbyn and his Islamist-leftist alliance.

Israel-directed antisemitism

Hostilities against Israel appear today in the form of a pincer movement: On one side of the pincer we have classic antisemites such as Ali Khamenei or Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah. On the other side we find non-Jewish and Jewish fellow-travellers of antisemitism – the so-called anti-Zionists – who take up and further Iran's attempts to make the destruction of the Jewish state ideologically and emotionally more acceptable.

An essential feature of such anti-Zionism is the forgery of the Middle East's factual history. They cling, for example, to the PLO mantra that "Zionism is ... organically linked with world imperialism and is opposed to all liberation movements or movements for progress in the world", to quote the PLO Charter of 1968.

This is a falsification of history. In fact, the opposite is true, as Jeffrey Herf has recently shown in his latest must-read book, entitled "Israel's moment". On the one hand, we learn that before 1948 Zionism was not promoted but combatted by "world imperialism" - if we mean by that the British government and the Pentagon and State Department in the USA – because at the start of the Cold War Zionism was considered a tool of Moscow.

On the other hand, in 1946 Zionism was not opposed, but supported by the "movements for progress in the world" referred to by the PLO. This included not only all the Soviet bloc governments, but also all those conservative, liberal and leftist forces in the USA that had adopted an anti-Nazi position during the war. In the face of the Shoah, in 1945 all these forces advocated the establishment of a Jewish state. Moreover, in 1948, when the Arab countries attacked Israel, they came out in defence of this state, while also denouncing antisemites and Nazi collaborators such as the former Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin el-Husseini.

I am therefore convinced – and this is my *third* proposal, that the Centre must strive to break the PLO's historiographical monopoly and develop a new and independent view of Middle Eastern history. In 1975, the UN General Assembly voted to target Zionism as "a form of racism". Although this resolution was overturned in 1991, hatred of Israel has remained virulent especially in universities. It is high time to dispel the miasma that has distorted the study of Middle Eastern history since then.

There is still much to discover. And we will perhaps find out that the new London Centre can reconnect with the tradition of the anti-Nazi movement of the late 1940s.

So, those are my three suggestions for the Centre's work: firstly to reinforce Holocaust awareness, in order to highlight the specific nature of antisemitism; secondly to analyze antisemitism in the Muslim world and thirdly to reconstruct the real history of the Middle East conflict free from ideological blinkers.

And let me add: for one really horrifying moment there was a prospect of an antisemitic British prime minister, but the worst did not happen. This was also due to the British Jewish

community's unity and strong will to resist. However, the whole episode also shows how thin is the ice on which we are skating and how much work lies ahead of us. The false conclusions drawn from 9/11 should be a reminder of the peril.

I appreciate your attention and I would like to thank my London friend Colin Meade for his help in preparing this paper. May the London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism enjoy the great success that is needed!

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