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The Roots of Delusion

Many believe that there is a correlation between Islamic antisemitism and Israel's policies. Are they right?

To kill people because they are Jews: that was the explicit goal of the Islamists' attacks in Mombasa, Casablanca and Istanbul. To demonise people because they are Jews: that was the explicit goal of Mahatir Mohamad's keynote address as outgoing premier of Malaysia delivered at the Summit of Islamic States in Kuala Lumpur in October 2003. Mahatir was the first head of government since 1945 to advocate antisemitism openly, doing so before a global meeting attended by the representatives of 57 countries and 2,200 journalists, and receiving a standing ovation no less for his message of hate.¹

The extent and nature of this hatred of Jews is a phenomenon that Europeans find hard to acknowledge. While the right-wing antisemitism of politicians like Le Pen in France or of German MP Martin Hohmann has caused much justified indignation, the very same antisemitism, however, is being played down or even ignored when it is expressed by Islamic leaders, Islamists or Arabs. In the latter case, many observers point a finger at Ariel Sharon: Is it not his policies which provoke Islamic antisemitism? Will not such hatred of Jews simply disappear as soon as the Palestine conflict is settled?

There is certainly an interrelationship between developments in the Middle East and the mobilisation of antisemites around the world. It does not make sense, however, to draw a line between the "lunatic" antisemitism of the extreme right, on the one hand, and a more "understandable" antisemitism within the Arab-Islamic world, on the other, simply because the latter seems to respond to real problems. *Firstly*, Islamic as well as European antisemitism are both based on the same phantasm of a Jewish world conspiracy which demonises Jews as the eternal enemy of mankind. In both cases too, the style of argument is fundamentally racist: seemingly eternal negative character traits are imputed to "the Jews" in order to dehumanise them. Jewish World Conspiracy theories and antisemitic racial stereotypes have, however, nothing in common with the traditional image of Jews in Islam. It is rather Nazi ideology which has been resurrected here: in confronting Islamic antisemitism, it is the distorted face of Europe's own history which stares back at us.²

Secondly, research and analysis by social scientists provide ample proof that antisemitism is unrelated to the actual behaviour of Jews. The same applies to Israeli policies. The policies of the Israeli government may give rise to anger and wrath. But there is no Israeli policy, however deserving of criticism it may be, that makes plausible the antisemite's assumption that Washington is ruled by Jerusalem. Those, however, who have fallen prey to such demonizing delusions, will be sure to find their antisemitic prejudices confirmed by whatever the Israeli government does or does not do.

Thirdly, also considered in historical terms, Arab/Muslim antisemitism is not an immediate result of the present Middle East conflict. As far back as 1894, before a Zionist movement even existed, the first translation of the German antisemite August Rohling's *The Talmud Jew* appeared in Arabic. The publication of this book – which popularized the concept of the “Jewish threat” – can be considered as the starting point of modern Arab antisemitism. In 1920, there followed the first Arabic translation of one of the most repugnant anti-Jewish publication, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.³ One year later, on March 14, 1921, when Winston Churchill, at the time Britain's Colonial Minister, paid a visit to Jerusalem, he was handed an antisemitic document by the *Palestinian Arab Congress*, led by Musa Kasim el-Husseini, which the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg could easily have written himself: “... Jews have been amongst the most active advocates of destruction in many lands”, this *memorandum* claimed without saying a single word about the actual conduct of Zionist settlers, “... It is well known that the disintegration of Russia was wholly or in great part brought about by the Jews, and a large portion of the defeat of Germany and Austria must also be put at their door. ... The Jew is a Jew all the world over. He amasses the wealth of a country and then leads its people, whom he has already impoverished, where he chooses. He encourages wars when self-interest dictates, and thus uses the armies of the nations to do his bidding.”⁴

It was in the spirit of such virulent antisemitism that, in the spring of 1920 and 1921, under the command of the later Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin el-Husseini, the ancient Jewish quarters of Jerusalem and Jaffa were attacked and 48 Jews were killed. In 1929, a further massacre took place in the Jewish districts of Hebron and Safad. 133 Jews were killed. This attack as well was not aimed at Zionists but at unarmed members of ancient Jewish communities which had been living in the area for hundreds of years. Afterwards, the Mufti quoted the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in order to justify such barbaric acts.⁵ Thus, already more than 20 years before the creation of the state of Israel, antisemitic manifestos were published and pogroms took place in Palestine. Moreover, it is the very same antisemitism which continues to place its stamp upon the Middle East conflict right up to the present time.

Zionist immigration and the purchase of land by Jews doubtlessly created all manner of conflicts and disagreements. It is noteworthy however, that the Mufti's antisemitism was challenged by Palestinian Muslims during the 1920s. For example, members of the influential Nashashibi clan defended Judaism against antisemitic slander. In addition, many village sheiks signed petitions which rejected the Mufti's line and even welcomed Zionist immigration.⁶

But Amin el-Husseini, who had been appointed Mufti by the British mandate authority and had been courted by the British for decades, prevailed. From the mosques, the Mufti declared the relentless struggle against the Jews as the most important obligation of all believers. Those who dared to resist his anti-Jewish orders were publicly denounced and publicly threatened during Friday prayers.

In 1937, when Arab Palestinians were offered their own state next to a tiny Jewish one (the "Peel Plan"), not only did the Zionists agree to this plan, but also the moderate Arabs represented by the Nashashibi clan gave their consent. It was only the veto of Amin el-Husseini that caused this two-state-solution to fail. In 1947, when the United Nations passed its Resolution of Partition of Palestine, the Mufti vehemently opposed the partition plan and saw to it that the Arab camp rejected the resolution, in order to prepare instead for war against the nascent Israeli state.⁷ Thus the scandalous fact that el-Husseini, who was sought in Europe as a Nazi war criminal and once counted Heinrich Himmler among his friends, succeeded in becoming once more the spokesperson for the Arab Palestinians, has influenced the course of history to this day.

Later, the former Mufti acted as patron and financier of the Fatah movement, founded in 1959, and he unofficially appointed Jassir Arafat as his successor. "Amin el-Husseini had the impression that Arafat was the proper leader for the Palestinian nation", reported Muheidin al-Husseini, the Mufti's son-in-law.⁸

Today, it is above all the Islamist movement *Hamas* which has taken up the heritage of the Mufti of Jerusalem. This Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood not only persistently undermines every possible point of departure for a peaceful solution to the Middle East conflict, it has also adopted the antisemitism of the Nazis in its 1988 *Charter*. The *Hamas Charter* portrays Jews as a global evil responsible for the French Revolution and for both the First and the Second World Wars, not to mention the exploitation of the Third World and the international drug trade. Symptomatically, Article 32 of the *Charter* cites the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as if it were an authoritative and authentic historical document.⁹

In light of these facts, even those who blame Israeli policy for human rights violations cannot help but recognize that from the very beginning the Zionist movement and the Jewish state have been confronted by an opponent which, as a rule, was not moved by rational motives but rather by antisemitism and the determination to annihilate the Jews or the Jewish state. It is not the escalation of the Middle East conflict which has

given rise to antisemitism; it is rather antisemitism which has given rise to the escalation of the Middle East conflict – again and again.

But if it was not the conflict over the possession of land that caused the antisemitic spark in Palestine to develop into an Arab-Islamic conflagration, what was it?

Antisemitic ideologists have always treated Jews and the threatening dimensions of capitalist modernity as being of one piece. For this purpose, the facts of European history had to be twisted. Not so in the case of Palestine, however. Here, the correlation between the arrival of the Zionist immigrants and the arrival of rapid modernization was not imagined but real.

At the beginning of the 20th century when progressive Jews flocked to Palestine from Russia after the failed revolution of 1905, large parts of the Arab community in Palestine were still leading mostly pre-modern lives dominated by patriarchy, the subordination of women, strict loyalty to one's clan, and the unquestioning adherence to one's religion. These new Jewish immigrants, however, were embarking on quite a different mode of life. To most of the rural population in Palestine, they personified the subversive and, therefore, the threatening aspects of modern life, such as secularisation, the individual pursuit of happiness, freedom of opinion and the equality of women. Moreover, the new immigrants had no intention of recognizing the subordinate status which traditional Islam accords Christians and Jews. There is hardly any other region in the world where such different life-styles and social ideals have clashed so sharply.

Still, during the first decades of the 20th century, not a few Arabs considered these modernising effects of Zionist immigration in a favourable light. For example, the editor of the Egypt's daily *al-Ahram* wrote in 1913: "The Zionists are necessary for this region. The money they will bring in, their intelligence and the diligence which is one of their characteristics will, without doubt, bring new life to the country."¹⁰ During the 1920's, prominent leaders in Egypt believed "that the progress of Zionism might help to secure the development of a new Eastern civilisation," as Mr. Kisch who was at that time Chairman of the Palestine Zionist Executive noted in his diary after visiting Cairo in 1924.¹¹ In 1924, the modernising model of Kemal Atatürk had replaced the caliphate in Turkey and beginning in 1925, the Shah of Iran, Reza Khan, had embarked on the secularisation of his country.

In Palestine, however, the Mufti's policy left no room for reformist or modernist Islamic development. The opposite was the case. Speaking at a religious conference in 1935, the Mufti complained: "... We have begun to see some women in objectionable attire ... as well as places of entertainment, the cinema, the theatre and some shameless magazines published in the name of Art and Culture, but open to all vices. These highly detrimental publications enter our houses and courtyards like adders, where they kill morality and demolish the foundation of society." The Jews were blamed for

this alleged corruption of moral values, as demonstrated by another statement of Amin el-Husseini: "... They [i.e. the Jews] have also spread here their customs and usages which are opposed to our religion and to our whole way of life. Above all, our youth is being morally shattered. The Jewish girls who run around in shorts demoralize our youth by their mere presence."¹² For el-Husseini, "Jerusalem" was the focal point of the "rebirth of Islam" in its pure version, and Palestine was the center from which the struggle against modernity and thereby against the Jews was to start. It is revealing how Giselher Wirsing, a leading Nazi journalist and admirer of the Mufti, judged those different currents in Palestine. "... In Palestine, the capitalist way of thinking and living (as well as its Marxist equivalent) is exclusively embodied in Jewry", he wrote. However, as far as Islam is concerned, "... the ideas of the West have not succeeded in casting doubt on the essence of the traditional way of life." In Palestine, due to the rule of the Mufti, "... the breakthrough of liberalistic ideas has barely taken place. Apparently, for those ideas, only the Nashashibis family would have been suitable, and for this reason ... they received support from England, in particular."¹³

At the behest of the SS, Wirsing visited Palestine twice during the period of the "Arab revolt" (1936-1939). Backed by Nazi Germany and orchestrated by the Mufti, from 1937 on this revolt was directed mainly against Palestinian moderates and supporters of modernisation. In those territories of Palestine which the Mufti controlled during the revolt, the very first Islamist reign of terror was established: Palestinians who did not abide by the Mufti's anti-Western dress code or who did not strictly obey Sharia law, were immediately put to death.¹⁴

As a result of the revolt, the Palestinian's moderate wing paled into insignificance. This development not only represented a turning point in the history of Palestine, it has influenced the subsequent history of the entire Arab world. Throughout the region, hatred of Jews was incited, in order to combat the subversive elements of modernity that the Zionist immigration had introduced and to protect the existing societal order from their effects.

The interrelationship between antisemitism and anti-modernism accounts for the attraction of the antisemitic tract *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the Arab world. The text is designed to discredit liberalism: in order to advance the combating of individual liberties, the latter are denounced as the essential tool of a global Jewish conspiracy. The fabrications that were disseminated 100 years ago by the secret agents of the Tsar in order to rescue the Russian monarchy have been repeated for the last 50 years by the successors of Ibn Saud to save Arab feudalism or, in the case of Egypt, to preserve the existing power structure.

No one should nourish the dangerous illusion that it would simply require some political concessions by Israel to stop anti-Jewish hatemongering within the Arab-Islamic world. Israel and Islamic antisemitism are indeed connected, but in quite a different way than is usually assumed. This hatred of Jews is not caused by what Zionists do, it is caused by what Zionists are. Just like Nazi antisemitism during the 1930's, Islamic antisemitism today represents the key element of a regressive revolution. The Middle East conflict is not the cause of antisemitic attacks in Paris and Istanbul, but merely the pretext for them; the negative image of Ariel Sharon is just a platform for agitation and a disguise. If you lift this mask ever so slightly, it is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that peek out from under it. For Islamists, the issue at stake is not the welfare of individual Palestinians but the abolition of enlightenment, reason, and individual freedom in favor of a repressive sharia dictatorship.

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¹ Mahatir said: "The Jews rule the world by proxy: They get others to fight and die for them. ... They invented socialism, communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so that they can enjoy equal rights with others. With these they have now gained control of the most powerful countries and they, this tiny community, have become a world power." Cf. Views of Jews By Malaysian: His Own Words, New York Times, October 21, 2003.

² According to Bernard Lewis, "Nazi-type anti-Semitism came to dominate Arab discussions of Zionism and Judaism as well as the state of Israel" in the wake of the defeat of 1967. Cf. Bernard Lewis, Semites and Anti-Semites, Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London) 1986, p. 240.

³ See: The Development of Arab Anti-Semitism. An interview with Meir Litvak in: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism No. 5, February 2 2003, p 2.

⁴ The memorandum is documented in: Martin Gilbert, Winston S. Churchill, Volume IV Companion Part 2 Documents July 1919 – March 1921, pp.1386 - 1388.

⁵ Gudrun Krämer, Geschichte Palästinas, München 2002, pp. 246-250; p.272.

⁶ David Th. Schiller, Palästinenser zwischen Terrorismus und Diplomatie, München 1982, p. 92.

⁷ On November 29, 1947, the United Nation's General Assembly decided to divide Palestine into a Jewish state (56 % of the territory for 500,000 Jews and 500,000 Muslim Arabs) and an Arab state (43 of the territory for 750,000 Arabs and 10,000 Jews) while putting Jerusalem under international control.

⁸ Cf. Janet Wallach and John Wallach, Jassir Arafat, München 1994, p. 143.

⁹ The Hamas-Charter is available for consultation at:
www.palestinecenter.org/cpsp/documents/charter.html .

¹⁰ Stefan Wild, Zum Selbstverständnis palästinensisch-arabischer Nationalität, in: Helmut Mejcher, Die Palästina-Frage 1917-1948, Paderborn 1993, p. 79.

¹¹ F. H. Kisch, "Palestine Diary", Victor Gollancz Ltd, London 1938, p.110.

¹² Uri M. Kupferschmidt, The Supreme Muslim Council. Islam under the British Mandate for Palestine, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1987, p. 250 and p. 252.

¹³ Giselher Wirsing, "Engländer Juden Araber in Palästina", Jena 1939, quoted according to the 5th edition, Jena 1942, p. 132 and 136.

¹⁴ Kurth Fischer-Weth, "Amin el-Husseini. Großmufti von Palästina", Berlin 1943, pp.81-82; Schiller, pp.145-148.