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European Roots of Antisemitism in Current Islamic Thinking¹

Islamic antisemitism is a key challenge of our time. It is not only expressed through Al Qaida's suicide terror attacks against synagogues or through attacks against Jewish institutions perpetrated by European Muslims, but is propagated day by day throughout the Arabic-Islamic world. Allow me to present to you three examples of this particular kind of antisemitism:

Firstly Sheikh Madiras, an Imam from Palestine. In September this year, he addressed the following to the faithful: "The Resurrection will not take place until the Muslims fight the Jews, and the Muslims kill them. The Muslims will kill the Jews, rejoice [in it], rejoice in Allah's Victory.... The Prophet said: the Jews will hide behind the rock and the tree, and the rock and the tree will say: oh servant of Allah, oh Muslim this is a Jew behind me, come and kill him!... Everything wants vengeance on the Jews, on these pigs on the face of the earth."² No-one protested when the Palestinian Authority's official TV station broadcast this call for genocide. The story of the rock and the tree is a popular one and a standard item on the Hamas propaganda menu.

Secondly Sheikh Tantawi, the Head of Cairo's Al-Azhar University and thus the most renowned spiritual authority in Sunni Islam. The fourth edition of his standard work "The people of Israel in the Koran and in the Sunna" appeared in 1997. In it, Tantawi writes that the Jews instigated the French Revolution and October Revolution; that they provoked the First and Second World Wars; that they control the world's media and economy; that they endeavour to destroy morality and religion and run brothels worldwide. Tantawi, the highest Sunni Muslim theologian, quotes Adolf Hitler's words in Mein Kampf that "in resisting the Jew, I am doing the work of the Lord". He praises the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, noting without the slightest trace of regret that "after the publication of the Protocols in Russia, some 10,000 Jews were killed."³

The Protocols are in fact an instrument of war. They project all the supposed evils of modernity onto one single enemy, the Jews, dividing the world on Manichean lines: on the one side the endangered Good, on the other, the Jewish Evil, leaving as the only choice either the destruction of this Evil or one's own downfall. In Russia, this pamphlet triggered pogroms, while in Germany it was the textbook for the Holocaust; no other forgery had greater influence on Hitler's policy towards the Jews.⁴

Isn't this a sufficient reason for this key text to be internationally outlawed, and people like Sheikh Tantawi who promote it ousted? But the opposite is taking place. Apart from the Koran, no other book enjoys greater influence in the contemporary Arab world than the

Protocols of the Elders of Zion. And that brings me to my third example: This forgery which guided Hitler has actually been popularised in recent years in soap-opera form in several TV series. Egyptian state television and many other TV stations have broadcast this incitement repeatedly during Ramadan.⁵ Anyone acquainted with Nazi films like "Jud Süss" [The Jew Süss] knows what incredible suggestive power the antisemitic film exerts. For example, at one point in the Arab film version of the Protocols, Jews haul a frightened youngster into a room. Then the camera zooms in on the child for a close-up shot of the Jews slitting his throat and collecting his blood in a basin.⁶ Here we have the blood libel, according to which Jews consume the blood of infidels during the Passover, being drummed into the minds of millions of Muslims at peak viewing time. It will take generations to get rid of this poison.

The seriousness of this development is rarely grasped in the Western world. Many either react as if hating Jews was a feature of the Oriental world, like hookahs or mosques. Or antisemitism among Muslims is glossed over as a kind of "anti-imperialism of fools" and rationalised as an alleged response to the Middle East conflict. The quintessence of both modes of thinking is the belief that Muslim antisemitism is totally different from European antisemitism.

This view, however, won't stand up to close examination. In Islamic tradition, the Jews were viewed as being inferior. As a result, the fear of "eternal" Jewish hostility or even a "Jewish conspiracy" was unknown in the Muslim world for centuries. An antisemitism based on the notion of a conspiracy of World Jewry is not rooted in Islamic tradition, but is based rather on European ideological models. The decisive transfer of this ideology took place between 1937 and 1945 under the impact of Nazi propaganda. How did Nazi Germany promote Islamic antisemitism?

The most important agent of Nazi propaganda was Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, and at that time one of the most prominent figures in the Islamic world. His friendship with Heinrich Himmler and his role in the Holocaust are widely known. Less so is an achievement which only today is bearing full fruit: the Mufti was the first to transfer European antisemitism into an Islamic context. At the heart of his efforts lay an attempt to revitalise the hatred of Jews on the basis of Islamic traditions which he cleverly linked with the notion of an "eternal" conspiracy against the faithful. There is a pamphlet entitled "Islam and Judaism" which the Nazis disseminated in several languages. In its foreword the Mufti wrote: "Regrettably, only a few know that the enmity between Islam and Judaism is not of recent vintage."⁷ And, indeed, the anti-Jewish Koranic *suras* and the above-mentioned *hadith* about the rock and the tree had lain completely forgotten for centuries. Now these messages of hatred have been brought back to life by continual repetition.

A second ally of the Nazis was the Muslim Brotherhood, which in 1939 received more money from Berlin than any other Egyptian group. These Muslim Brothers were the nucleus of

Islamism and have remained at the centre of Islamic antisemitism up to the present time. The Nazis appreciated not only their anti-Jewish campaigns but also their "fierce hostility to Western liberalism", as Giselher Wirsing, a contemporary, put it.⁸

The most powerful tool of Nazi propaganda in the Islamic world was, however, a radio transmitter near Berlin whose very existence is virtually unknown today. In the years from 1939 to 1945 the Zeesen short-wave transmitter broadcast its Arabic-language programs to the Islamic world every day. These programs skilfully mixed antisemitic agitation with quotations from the Koran as well as bits of Arabic music. A contemporary described the constantly repeated message like this: "the Jew has been the eternal enemy of the Muslims since the time of Mohammed. It is pleasing to God to kill him". Between 1939 and 1945, no other radio station enjoyed similar popularity in public places in the Arab world as this Nazi broadcast which from 1941 onwards was directed by the Mufti⁹.

In April 1945 Radio Zeesen was closed down. From now on, however, antisemitism in the Arab world began to spread even more rapidly. Today, we are confronted with a Jew-hatred which fuses together the traditional European notion that Jews are deviously powerful with the Islamic view that they are inferior. At one and the same time, we find Jews being derided as "pigs" and "apes", while simultaneously being demonised as the puppet masters of world politics.

The result is a genocidal Islamist ideology which produces genocidal programs and genocidal actions. Radical Islamists not only advocate the murder of people who happens to be Jew; they practice what they preach - be it in Djerba, Istanbul, Casablanca, Mombasa or Taba. So far, their destructive ambitions are mainly restricted by technological limitations.

This has consequences for how the Holocaust is viewed. All those who consider the Jews to be a global force of Evil, and wish to annihilate them, cannot sincerely criticise Hitler's so-called Final Solution. Instead, to the outside world they deny that the Holocaust took place, while in secret it serves as a source of inspiration to them and as a precedent which proves that one can in fact murder millions of Jews.

This antisemitism has nothing to do with ethnic characteristics or cultural peculiarities deserving protection from criticism on grounds of "political correctness". In fact, we are witnessing the revival of Nazi ideology in a new garb. Giving support to all those Muslims who oppose this development is of the utmost importance. Let me therefore conclude with an appeal by a Muslim, a scholar of Islam, Bassam Tibi, who said: "only when the public takes the appropriate stand against the antisemitic dimension of Islamism will it be possible to say that they have truly understood the lessons of the Holocaust."¹⁰

¹ This paper was presented at the "Lessons & Legacies VIII International Conference On The Holocaust", November 4-7, 2004 at Brown University in Providence, R.I., USA.

² Itamar Marcus & Barbara Crook, Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin, 14 September 2004

³ Wolfgang Driesch, *Islam, Judentum und Israel*, Deutsches Orient-Institut, Mitteilungen Band 66 (Hamburg, 2003), pp. 76ff. The Hitler quotation is from „Mein Kampf“, München 1934, p. 70.

⁴ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Ein Gerücht über die Juden. Die 'Protokolle der Weisen von Zion' und der alltägliche Rassismus* (Berlin, 1999), pp. 129ff

⁵ 'Galloping Anti-Semitism', *Washington Post*, 16 November 2002

⁶ Lisbeth Rausing, 'Frequenzen des Hasses. Wie die Hisbollah ihre Mordpropaganda nach Europa trägt', Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), 13 March 2004

⁷ Zani Lebl, *Hadz-Amin I Berlin* (Belgrade, 2003), pp. 181-82

⁸ Giselher Wirsing, *Engländer Juden Araber in Palästina*, fifth revised edition (Leipzig 1942), p. 136.

⁹ Matthias Küntzel, 'Von Zeesen bis Beirut. Nationalsozialismus und Antisemitismus in der arabischen Welt', in D. Rabinovici, U. Speck, N. Sznajder, *Neuer Antisemitismus? Eine globale Debatte* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), pp. 271ff

¹⁰ Bassam Tibi, 'Der importierte Hass. Antisemitismus ist in der arabischen Welt weit verbreitet', *Die Zeit*, 6 February 2003