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How to Challenge Islamic Antisemitism?

Although not restricted to Islamist movements, Islamic antisemitism is a key factor in the Islamists' war against the modern world. It lies behind Tehran's desire to destroy the "cancerous tumor" of Israel and inspires Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's threat that Israelis won't be able "to find a tree to hide behind," a clear allusion to a hadith that demands the killing of Jews.¹ It causes Mahmoud Abbas to deny any connection between Jerusalem and the Jews² and transforms the political conflict between Israel and the Arabs into a religious struggle between good and evil.

Islamic antisemitism mobilizes the terrorists of the Islamic State to murder Jews in Europe, and it ensures that not only in Amman, but also in Berlin and Malmö, Arabs threaten Jews with this particular war cry: *Khaybar, Khaybar, O Jews; the army of Muhammad will return*. Khaybar is the name of an oasis inhabited by Jews that Muhammad conquered in blood in 628. It is also the name of an assault rifle made in Iran and a type of rocket used by Hezbollah to fire at Israeli cities in 2006.

In this paper, I will discuss four topics: (1) What distinguishes Islamic antisemitism from other forms of Jew-hatred? (2) Why and when did this ideology come about? (3) Why is it particularly difficult to fight Islamic antisemitism? (4) How can we challenge Islamic antisemitism?

What Does the Term "Islamic Antisemitism" Mean?

This term is neither a general attack on Islam, whose texts also include Jew-friendly passages, nor a general accusation against Muslims, quite a few of whom are against antisemitism. Instead, it refers to a specific kind of antisemi-

1 A. Gruber, "Erdogans Erlösungsantisemitismus: 'Kein Baum wird die Juden schützen'," *mena-watch*, issued December 15, 2017, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://www.mena-watch.com/mena-analysen-beitraege/erdogans-erloesungsantisemitismus-kein-baum-wird-die-juden-schuetzen/>.

2 "Israel's Violations Absolve us from our Commitments: Abbas at OIC Summit," *Wafa-News-Agency*, issued December 13, 2017, accessed May 3, 2018, http://iinanews.org/page/public/news_details.aspx?id=226907#.WurNEpdCTcs.

tism based on a fusion of two sources: the anti-Judaism of early Islam and the modern antisemitism of Europe.

European antisemitism, as manifested in the phantasm of the Jewish world conspiracy, was alien to the original image of the Jews in Islam. Only in the Christian tradition do Jews appear as a deadly and powerful force capable of killing even God's only son. They were able to bring death and ruin on humanity—being held responsible for outbreaks of the plague. The Nazis believed in the phantasm of the Jews as the rulers of the world, who were thus also responsible for all its misfortunes. There was, according to their phantasm, only one way to the redemption of the world: the systematic annihilation of the Jews.

Not so in Islam. Here, it was not the Jews who murdered the Prophet, but the Prophet who murdered Jews; in the years 623 to 627, Muhammad had all the Jewish tribes in Medina enslaved, expelled, or killed. Therefore, some typical features of Christian antisemitism did not appear in the Muslim world: "There were no fears of Jewish conspiracy and domination, no charges of diabolic evil. Jews were not accused of poisoning wells or spreading the plague."³

Instead, Muslims used to treat the Jews with contempt or condescending toleration. The hatred of Jews fostered in the Qur'an and in the Sunnah pursued the goal of keeping them down as dhimmis: hostility was accompanied by devaluation.

In Shiite Iran Jews were even perceived as being unclean. When it was raining, they were forbidden to take to the streets so that their "impurity" would not be transferred to Muslims. This cultural imprint made the idea of Christian antisemites, that Jews of all people could represent a permanent threat to the world, seem absurd.

This, however, changed with the emergence of Islamic antisemitism. Its essence is the fusion of Islamic anti-Judaism from the old scriptures with modern European antisemitism—hence the combination of the worst Islamic and the worst Christian images of the Jews.

A case in point is the Charter of Hamas. In Article 7, this Charter cites a *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad says that the Muslims will kill the Jews "when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. Then stones and trees will say: O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him."

3 B. Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), 122.

At the same time, Article 22 of the same Charter states that the Jews “were behind World War I ... [and] were behind World War II ... There is no war going on anywhere without having their finger in it.”⁴

This Charter simultaneously portrays the Jews on the one hand as degraded, fleeing, and hiding and, on the other, as the secret and true rulers of the world. Logically, this combination is as absurd as the Nazi belief that Jews simultaneously control Communism and Wall Street.

However, through this very mixture, both components become radicalized: European antisemitism becomes recharged by the religious and fanatical moment of radical Islam, while the old anti-Judaism of the Qur’an—supplemented by the world conspiracy theory—receives a new and eliminatory quality.

One prominent feature of this new quality is the conviction that Jews everywhere, in league with Israel, are behind a sinister plot to undermine and eradicate Islam.

As early as during the 1930s, Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, claimed that the Jews were eager to destroy the holy Muslim sites in Jerusalem. In the 1950s, Sayyid Qutb continued this propaganda in his pamphlet, “Our Struggle With the Jews”:

The bitter war which the Jews launched against Islam ... has not been extinguished, even for one moment, for close on fourteen centuries until this moment, its blaze raging in all corners of the earth.⁵

The seventh century is here again associated with the twentieth century and Qur’anic statements about Jews mixed with the phantasm of a worldwide conspiracy. This viewpoint excludes compromises: “Muslims and Jews [are] locked in a timeless and total confrontation, until one completely subjugates the other.”⁶ Thus, the political conflict between Arabs and Zionists about Palestine became Islamized and changed into a religious struggle of life and death. How and when did this kind of Jew-hatred come about?

⁴ Hamas Covenant of 1988, accessed May 3, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp.

⁵ R. L. Nettler, *Past Trials and Present Tribulations: A Muslim Fundamentalist's View of the Jews* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987), 83–84.

⁶ M. Kramer, “The Jihad Against the Jews,” *Commentary*, October 1994, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-jihad-against-the-jews/>.

The Origins of Islamic Antisemitism

Islamic antisemitism is not simply a continuation of tradition or a response to injustice; in fact it is the product of a process of deliberate fusion of old Islamic scriptures and new conspiracy theories which started only eighty years ago.

Surprisingly, Nazi Germany's Arabic-speaking propaganda played an important role. This fact is little known but has been confirmed by recent seminal studies such as Jeffrey Herf's *Nazi Propaganda in the Arab World* of 2009 and David Motadel's *Islam and Nazi Germany's War* of 2014.⁷

Since 1937, the Nazis sought to radicalize the latent anti-Judaism of Muslims in order to destroy the British plan for a two-state solution for Palestine—the so-called Peel Plan, which provided for the creation of a small Jewish state. However, initial Nazi attempts to export their racist antisemitism into the Islamic world failed. As a consequence, the Nazis discovered the Islamic creed as a door opener to gain access to the Muslim masses. There is a whole lot of antisemitic potential in Islamic scriptures if you read them selectively. To quote David Motadel:

Berlin made explicit use of religious rhetoric, terminology, and imagery and sought to engage with and reinterpret religious doctrine and concepts ... Sacred texts such as the Qur'an ... were politicized to incite religious violence against alleged common enemies ... German propaganda combined Islam with anti-Jewish agitation to an extent that had not hitherto been known in the modern Muslim world.⁸

The first text that propagated sheer Jew-hatred in an Islamic context by mixing selected anti-Jewish episodes of Muhammad's life with the so-called wickedness of Jews in the twentieth century was the thirty-one-page pamphlet "Islam—Jewry: Call by the Grand Mufti to the Islamic World," published in 1937 in Cairo. On the one hand, this text builds on the traditions of early Islam: "The battle between the Jews and Islam began when Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina," we read here:

At that time the Jewish methods were already the same as today. Their weapon as ever was defamation ... They said Muhammad was a swindler..., they tried to undermine Muhammad's honor ..., they began to ask Muhammad senseless and unsolvable questions. ... But with this method too, as before, they had no success. So they ... tried to eradicate the Muslims.

⁷ J. Herf, *Nazi Propaganda in the Arab World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); D. Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁸ Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War*, 76, 97.

At the same time, the text attacks the Jews in the diction of European antisemitism as “great businessmen,” “exploiters,” “microbes,” and as the perpetrators of the plague. Since Muhammad’s days, we read here, the Jews have been constantly trying to “destroy Muslims.” “The verses from the Qur’an and hadith,” the brochure concludes,

prove to you that the Jews have been the bitterest enemies of Islam and continue to try to destroy it. Do not believe them, they only know hypocrisy and cunning. Hold together, fight for the Islamic thought, fight for your religion and your existence! Do not rest until your land is free of the Jews.⁹

During the Second World War, the Nazis distributed this pamphlet in several languages within the Arabic-Islamic world and thus confronted the Jews with the perspective of total war: If the evil of the Jews is immutable and permanent, transcending time and circumstances, there is only one way to cleanse the world of them—by their complete expulsion or annihilation.

Nazi Germany propagated this idea also by using radio programs in the Arabic language that were broadcast three times a day and seven times a week between April 1939 and April 1945.¹⁰

For example, in a speech broadcast in March 1944, the Mufti of Jerusalem termed the Jews “bacilli” and “microbes” and called on Muslims

to drive all Jews out of Palestine and the other Arab and Islamic countries with determination and strength. Spend all efforts to ensure that there is no longer a single Jew or single colonialist left in these countries.¹¹

This long-lasting propaganda strengthened an exclusively anti-Jewish reading of the Islamic scriptures, popularized European conspiracy theories and agitated in an antisemitic manner against the Zionist project. It gradually changed the perception of Jews within Islamic societies and contributed to the fact that Jews were more and more seen as a kind of “race” and that hostility to Jews became far more intense than in past eras of Islamic history.

⁹ Translated from the German version of M. Sabry, “Islam-Judentum. Aufruf des Großmufti an die islamische Welt im Jahre 1937,” in *Islam, Judentum, Bolschewismus* (Berlin: Junker & Dünhaupt, 1938), 22–32.

¹⁰ See Herf’s seminal study about this radio propaganda, Herf, *Nazi Propaganda in the Arab World*.

¹¹ G. Höpp, ed., *Mufti-Papiere: Briefe, Memoranden, Reden und Aufrufe Amin al-Husainis aus dem Exil, 1940–1945* (Berlin: Schwarz, 2001), 211.

The pamphlet “Islam—Judaism” was followed in the early 1950s by Sayyid Qutb’s “Our Struggle with the Jews”—a deeply religious pamphlet which Saudi Arabia disseminated in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. Then, in 1988, came the Charter of Hamas. One might think that an ideology that developed only eighty years ago would be easy to defeat. But this is not the case.

Why is it so Difficult to Fight this Particular Form of Antisemitism?

One main reason is obvious: Islamic antisemitism is connected to the Muslim creed. Western societies, however, are split when it comes to the question of Islam. One side tends to downplay Islamism and Islamic antisemitism, while the other side seeks to demonize Islam as a whole.

The successes of Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and others have shown that racism against Muslims has become a mass phenomenon. These movements mix up Islamism and Islam in a populist way and tend to use it to place every dark-skinned Muslim under general suspicion.

It would be a mistake to expect these movements to help in the fight against Islamic Jew-hatred. They create, on the contrary, detrimental effects because, first of all, they lead this alleged fight under a racist banner and tend to label all Muslims as potential or real antisemites. They thus endorse “the Islamist claim that Islamists alone are true Muslims, while waving away the modernizers [among them] as outliers, fabulists, and frauds,” to quote Daniel Pipes.¹²

Second, they want to “liberate” their own countries from Muslims, but not the Muslims in other parts of the world, from the terror of Islamism and the idiocy of antisemitism. Third, they tolerate and even support antisemites within their own ranks.

The emergence of these racist movements is, however, partly caused by the downplaying of Islamism and Islamic antisemitism by the political and media elite in the West. This leads us to the second stupid approach to Islamic antisemitism—to treat it with “ignorance, avoidance, minimization, denial or misinterpretation.”¹³ Neil J. Kressel wrote a whole book about this “conspiracy of si-

¹² D. Pipes, “Foreword,” in *The Challenge of Modernizing Islam: Reformers Speak Out and the Obstacles They Face*, ed. C. Douglass-Williams (New York: Encounter Books, 2017), xvii.

¹³ N. J. Kressel, “*The Sons of Pigs and Apes*”: *Muslim Antisemitism and the Conspiracy of Silence* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2012), 57.

lence.” Few would openly say that they are willing to tolerate or ignore Jew-hatred among Muslims. Instead, as an excuse they claim “that whatever happens now in the Muslim and Arab world by definition bears no resemblance to the ... history of Jew-hatred in the Christian world.”¹⁴

A case in point is Gilbert Achcar, a professor at the London School of Oriental and African Studies. Achcar does not deny that “antisemitism ... has grown spectacularly in Arab political statements and Arab media.”¹⁵ Yet, he then goes on to excuse it by asking rhetorically:

Is the fantasy-based hatred of the Jews that was and still is typical of European racists ... the equivalent of the hatred felt by Arabs enraged by the occupation and/or destruction of Arab lands...?¹⁶

His answer is a definite no:

The antisemitic statements now heard in Arab countries are fantasy-laden expressions—due, as a rule to cultural backwardness—of an intense national frustration and oppression for which “the Jews” of Palestine in their majority, as well as Israel, the “Jewish state” they founded, must, in fact, be held responsible.¹⁷

This statement presents a two-pronged apology for Islamic antisemitism—first, with claiming that such antisemitism is the antisemitism of the oppressed. Following this idea, it is consequently claimed that Israel is responsible for this antisemitism since it is also responsible for the oppression.¹⁸

This assumption is highly problematic since those “fantasy-laden” expressions are directed at the destruction of the Jews or Israel. They, as a rule, do not address real deeds or misdeeds of Israel’s governments. Otherwise, the response would not be antisemitism aimed at annihilation but justified or unjustified indignation over a misguided policy aimed at changing it.

In a second excuse, Achcar claims that Arab antisemitism is “due ... to cultural backwardness.” This is erroneous in two ways. First, it is factually wrong: it

¹⁴ Ibid., 100.

¹⁵ G. Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 248.

¹⁶ Ibid., 275.

¹⁷ Ibid., 256.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Küntzel, “Western Intellectual Attitudes toward Antisemitism in the Arab and Muslim World,” in *Unity and Diversity in Contemporary Antisemitism: The Bristol-Sheffield Hallam Colloquium on Contemporary Antisemitism*, ed. L. D. Klaff and J. G. Campbell (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 193.

is mostly members of the cultural elite such as academics, journalists, publishers, and clerics who spread the message of hate. Secondly, this claim has a strong racist undertone.¹⁹ Achcar claims that, when Arabs deny the Holocaust, “it has nothing to do with any conviction. It’s just a way of people venting their anger, venting their frustration, in the only means that they feel is available to them.”²⁰ Achcar thus gives the antisemites, as long as they belong to what he considers an oppressed group, a moral *carte blanche*.

Achcar, like many of his colleagues, infantilizes Muslims by branding them as essentially stupid people who cannot be held to Western standards of decency and who cannot be expected to know what they are doing. Maajid Nawaz, a prominent British Muslim, derides this undertone: “A credible Muslim can only be inarticulate” and “requires an intermediary to ‘explain’ his anger.”²¹

We are dealing here with what I call the “orientalization” of antisemitism in the Arab or Muslim world which is of course a kind of racism in itself—albeit an apparently benevolent type of racism in the eyes of its upholders. Some might call it a “racism of low expectations,” as if a Muslim person is supposed to uphold appalling views, while others might call it “paternalistic racism.”

In addition, there is the charge of Islamophobia. This term is highly misleading because it mixes two different phenomena—unjust hatred against Muslims and necessary criticism of Islamism, Islam and the Qur’an—and condemns both equally. Words are crucial; this word was promoted in order to counter the critique of Islamic antisemitism—first by intimidating those who refuse to ignore or downplay the hatred of Jews among Muslims and second by introducing a counter-term to antisemitism.

The invention of opposite terms in order to parallel and downplay Nazism, antisemitism, or the Holocaust is nothing new. Some always combine the word “Nazism” with “Zionism,” others do not mention the term “Holocaust” without the counter-term “nakba” while the opposite term to antisemitism is, of course, Islamophobia.

It is true that racism is a component of antisemitism. Antisemitism, however, is not a component of racism but a specific ideology with elements not known in the field of racism. This peculiarity is ignored in the listing of “antisemitism” and “Islamophobia.” It was, by the way, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who more than any-

¹⁹ Cf. *idem*.

²⁰ G. Achcar, “Israel’s Propaganda War: Blame the Grand Mufti,” interview by G. Miller, *Monthly Review online*, 2010, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/achcar120510p.html>.

²¹ M. Nawaz, “The British Left’s Hypocritical Embrace of Islamism,” *Daily Beast*, August 8, 2015, updated April 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-british-lefts-hypocritical-embrace-of-islamism>.

one else made sure that the term “antisemitism” was always followed by the term “Islamophobia” in declarations by the Council of Europe or the OSCE.

Both—the downplayers of Islamism and the demonizers of each and every Muslim—have a biased point of view. The influence of one side, however, strengthens the influence of the other side and vice versa. Both betray the minority of modern Muslims who actively oppose Islamism and Islamic antisemitism. This betrayal is inexcusable since Islamists fight this minority of modern Muslims tooth and nail.

What Needs to Be Done to Break out of this Vicious Circle?

My first suggestion is easier said than done: There is the need to develop a political movement against right-wing populists and against appeasers of the Left; a movement which brings together those Muslims, ex-Muslims, and non-Muslims, who want to fight Islamic antisemitism and Islamism and who want to change the attitudes of governments and media in this respect. An international conference somewhere in Europe together with individuals from the MENA-region could be a starting point.

Today, Muslims who seek good relations with Jews are often treated as lepers. This has to end. It is therefore the first and most important step “to make the world safe for Muslim critics of antisemitism—physically safe, socially safe, organizationally safe, even academically safe.”²² These critics must not exclude the Qur’an. The Tunisian philosopher Mezri Haddad, for example, refuses to gloss over what the Qur’an says. Since “Islamic thinkers ... cannot purge the Qur’an of its potentially antisemitic dross” wrote Haddad, “they must closely examine this corpus with hermeneutical reason” and have to “show intellectual audacity.”²³

The time is ripe for this kind of endeavor. The intellectual climate within the Arab world has partly changed. More and more people have recognized that the dangers that threaten this region do not come from Israel but from Sunni jihadists and Iran’s theocracy. This experience seems today to be triggering a period of thaw in parts of the Arab world, and notably Saudi Arabia, not only with respect

²² Kressel, *“The Sons of Pigs and Apes,”* 201.

²³ Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Special Dispatch Series No. 1362, issued November 21, 2006.

to Israel and the Jews but also with regard to the debate about political and religious affairs.

Recently, for example, ‘Abd Al-Hamid Al-Hakim, a prominent Saudi intellectual, called via Twitter “to uproot the culture of hatred for Jews” while his colleague Mash’al Al-Sudairi blamed Amin el-Husseini in the London based Saudi daily *Asharq Al-Awsat*: “He was the one who tried to combine the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nazi-ideology” and “damaged the [Palestinian] cause more than anyone else.”²⁴

This dynamic contradicts both the malignant and the benevolent racists who try to construct a kind of *homo islamicus* to keep Muslims trapped in the cage of an immutable culture. It creates at the same time an opportunity to promote an alliance between Islamic and non-Islamic critics of Islamic antisemitism.

My second suggestion relates to the state level. Whether we are successful or unsuccessful in our fight against Islamic antisemitism depends crucially on the actions of governments.

In Germany, for example, there are various attempts to contain Islamic antisemitism with a mixture of pedagogy and state prohibitions. These attempts are honorable, but they remain pointless as long as this antisemitism is not contained at its source—that is in Tehran, Beirut, Gaza, or Ankara. They remain pointless as long as Jew-hatred incessantly manipulates the Muslims in Germany via social networks in the Turkish, Arabic, or Persian languages.

This proves that Islamic antisemitism is a major foreign policy issue. Only governments can stop this flow of hate messages by denouncing and punishing state or non-state actors that allow Islamic antisemitism to spread in textbooks, mosques, and media.

Regrettably, most Western governments ignore Islamic antisemitism in other parts of the world. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, for example, does not want to jeopardize Germany’s privileged relations with Ankara and Tehran.

²⁴ Z. Harel, “Shift In Saudi Media’s Attitude To Israel—Part II: Saudi Writer Who Visited Israel: We Want An Israeli Embassy in Riyadh; We Should Make Peace With Israel, Uproot Culture of Hatred For Jews,” MEMRI, Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1399, issued May 29, 2018, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.memri.org/reports/shift-saudi-medias-attitude-israel-%E2%80%93-part-ii-saudi-writer-who-visited-israel-we-want-israeli>; and “Saudi Writer: The Arab League Summits Are Completely Pointless; Palestinian Leaders—First And Foremost Jerusalem Mufti Al-Husseini and PLO Leader Arafat—Damaged the Palestinian Cause The Most,” MEMRI, Special Dispatch No. 7499, issued May 31, 2018, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.memri.org/reports/saudi-writer-arab-league-summits-are-completely-pointless-palestinian-leaders-%E2%80%93-first-and>.

Why is it Especially Important to Challenge Islamic Antisemitism?

Today, we are witnessing an antisemitic war, led by Islamists. The intention to kill any Jew expresses the essence of antisemitic warfare.

While conventional war—such as the ongoing war in the Ukraine or the many wars in Syria—is aimed at gaining territory and influence, the antisemitic war is aimed at extermination.

Take as an example the jihad warriors of the Islamic State: In Europe they especially target Jewish institutions such as the Jewish school in Toulouse, the kosher market in Paris, the Jewish museum in Brussels, or the synagogue in Copenhagen. They want to kill Jews. It does not matter if those Jews are Zionists or anti-Zionists, if they are supporters or opponents of Israeli policies. The only thing that matters is that Jews are killed.

The same is true with Israel. For Hezbollah or Hamas, it does not matter if the Qassam rocket or a suicide bomber kills a baby or an old person, a supporter of Netanyahu or a foe. What matters is that Jews are being killed. More than a few Islamists today believe that if you annihilate the Jewish state you will redeem the world. To quote just a few recent statements by officials of the Iranian regime: “We will raze the Zionist regime in less than eight minutes,” “Israel must be wiped off the earth!,” “In 25 years Israel will no longer be on the map.”²⁵

Let us assume for a moment that a nuclear power such as Pakistan told another nuclear power, such as India: “In 25 years, India will no longer be on the map.” There would be an outcry all over the world. For it would be clear to everyone: Whoever threatens a nuclear power with destruction is provoking a nuclear exchange, a nuclear disaster.

Israel is certainly a nuclear power and Iran has the ability to construct a nuclear weapon as well. Amazingly, there was no outcry when Teheran proclaimed: “Israel must be wiped off the map!” This battle cry, however, confronts us with a new kind of total war: the antisemitic nuclear war.

Thus, challenging Islamic antisemitism effectively is not only about protecting the Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East. It is crucial to peace in the world.

²⁵ Cf. E. Benari, “‘In 25 years Israel Will no Longer Be on the Map’,” *Arutz Sheva*, July 1, 2016, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/214351>.

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