

## Jihad and Jew-Hatred

By Jamie Glazov

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Frontpage Interview's guest today is Matthias Kuentzel, a political scientist in Hamburg, Germany. Since 2004, he has been a research associate at the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (SICSA) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 2006, he became a member of the Boards of Directors of "Scholars for Peace in the Middle East." He is the author of the new book, **Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11**. It was awarded the London Book Festival's annual grand prize for "books worthy of greater attention from the international publishing community." His essays about Islamism and anti-Semitism have been published inter alia in The New Republic, Policy Review, The Weekly Standard, The Wall Street Journal, Telos, and they have been translated into more than ten languages. In March 2008 he is going to present his new book in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Buffalo, Bangor, Augusta and Washington D.C.



**FP:** Matthias Kuentzel, welcome to Frontpage Interview.

**Kuentzel:** Thank you for the invitation. The pleasure is mine.

**FP:** What made you write this book?

**Kuentzel:** The September 11<sup>th</sup> massacre provided the initial impulse. I wanted to know why it happened and what it meant.

Prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> my written work was largely concerned with German antisemitism i.e. the examination of the ideological roots of the Holocaust. Therefore, it was not very difficult for me to find the traces of antisemitism in the 9/11 attacks. I subsequently learned that the organization from which Al Qa'ida sprang – the Muslim Brotherhood – was founded in 1928: Almost precisely when Fascism and National Socialism emerged. This fact enhanced my interest and I

began to systematically research the literature that was available then. A year later I published my book, the objective of which is limited: I discuss the inner and outer factors which produced Islamism during the 1930s. I pursue the development of Islamism from the 1930s to the present. I discuss the role which antisemitism plays within radical Islam and I try to figure out why many in the Arab world still venerate Hitler and deny the Holocaust.

**FP:** There are many similarities between Islamism and Islam, right?

**Kuentzel:** Absolutely. Islamism is a fundamentalist brand within Islam. It derives its authority from the Koran and the Sunna. One can interpret these two sources just as Islamists do.

Islamists fight against those Muslims who have been supposedly “corrupted” by the West and thus have been diverted from the “true” path of Islam; the path established in 7<sup>th</sup> century Islam. Thus, they take up the Wahhabite tendency. While Wahhabism, however, attached most significance to the observation of their strict rules of theology and avoided to get in touch with Europeans, Islamism from the outset formed a revolutionary mass movement. The founding members of the Muslim Brotherhood were industrial workers of the Suez Canal Company. Their political program was aimed at the inconsistencies of a modern industrialized society. Their style of campaigning had more in common with 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism and communism than with the Wahhabites. Today, Islamism is conducting a global religious war in order to destroy all freedom loving societies. And, at this juncture, we do not know who will win.

**FP:** How are Islamism and Islam different?

**Kuentzel:** Treating Islamism as equivalent to Islam is surely the best thing that could happen to Islamists. This would not only constitute an insult to every Muslim who risks her or his life in order to battle Islamism but would also obstruct our ability to pinpoint and hit this adversary.

Although Islamism can refer to actual passages in the Koran and in the Sunna, the majority of Muslims still reject a fundamentalist interpretation of the holy scripts and the talibanisation of life. Even if many of the Koran’s suras are unacceptable for us: Crucial is not the doctrine as such but how the Islamic world deals with it.

My book stresses the fundamental clash between the adherents of differing interpretations of the Koran during the 1930s: On the one hand those Muslims who wanted to assimilate to the modern world such as Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, Reza Shah in Persia and King Fuad in Egypt. On the other hand the marching up of the Muslim Brotherhood. On the one hand the Nashashibi clan’s willingness for dialogue in Palestine; on the other hand the Mufti’s determination to kill every Jew. My book demonstrates how Nazi Germany threw its weight behind these anti-

Western forces of Islam and how the late National Socialism provided financial and ideological support to cultivate the early Islamists' anti-Jewish campaigns.

**FP:** How did Nazi ideologies influence the Arabic picture of the Jews during the Thirties and Forties?

**Kuentzel:** Let's consider the case of Egypt. It is widely forgotten that in the 1920s the Jews of Egypt – at least within the cities - were an accepted and well respected part of public life: they had members of parliament, were employed at the royal palace and occupied important positions in the economic and political spheres. The Zionist movement was likewise accepted impartially: Egypt's government, for example, extended a cordial welcome to a Jewish teachers association delegation from the British mandate and Egyptian students travelled officially to Tel Aviv to take part in sports competition there. In 1937 Nazi Germany began to deploy financial and ideological support for the Mufti's machinations and the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-Jewish rabble-rousing. Between April 1939 and April 1945 the Nazis broadcast their Arabic radio program every night: On a daily basis the illiterate masses were entertained with Goebbelesque Jew-hating. At the same time these programs were adroitly replenished with Jew-hatred based on the Koran. Ten years later the center of antisemitism had moved from Berlin to Cairo and the Arab world.

**FP:** But there a relationship between ancient Islamic Jew-hatred and modern Islamic anti-Semitism.

**Kuentzel:** Yes. The separation from and hatred of the Jews began of course with Muhammad's activities in Medina and is a constitutive element of Islam. I often come back to this point in my book. Nevertheless, when we speak of 21<sup>st</sup> century antisemitism the expulsion of the Jews from Medina in the years 624-627 is not our most important point of departure. It is rather the Holocaust and the real danger that something similar might happen again.

Anti-Judaism as laid down in the Koran, is not the same as modern antisemitism laid down in "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion". Only in modern antisemitism are Jews identified with capitalism, urbanisation and modernism.

Mediaeval Jew-hatred considered everything Jewish to be evil. Modern antisemitism, on the other hand, deems all "evil" to be Jewish. Whether we are dealing with war, or with revolutions, or with drug trafficking, all of these occurrences are denounced – in the Hamas charter, for example – as "Jewish".

In ancient times the Jew could save his life through acceptance of the rules of dhimmitude or conversion to Christianity (or Islam). In the latter case, what is involved is not just oppression or conversion, but an irrational belief that the salvation of the world depends on the destruction of the Jews. It is this kind of mindset that precipitated the Holocaust. "The extermination of Jewry throughout

the world”, declared a Nazi directive from 1943, is “the precondition for an enduring peace.” This is similar to the mission that Islamism has set out upon whose first target is Israel. As Mahmud Ahmadinejad put it, “The Zionist regime will be wiped out and humanity will be liberated.”

In order to highlight one more peculiarity of modern antisemitism, allow me to cite a 19<sup>th</sup> century leader of the German Social Democratic Party, August Bebel. In 1893 he described antisemitism as the “the dumb guy’s socialism” and as a “movement that in spite of its reactionary character and against its own will ultimately appears revolutionary.” Here, Bebel had recognized (and yet at the same time misjudged) the anti-hegemonic and anti-capitalistic component of modern antisemitism which the National Socialists were able to exploit.

Today, it is this anti-hegemonic component that drives western leftists as well as national leaders in South America in the arms of radical Islam. Bin Laden and Ahmadinejad know quite well why they flatter “progressives” such as Norman Chomsky or Fidel Castro: In order to win new allies for their global revolt.

In sum: The export of modern European antisemitism to the Islamic world described in my book was not merely an affirmation of the traditional Islamic Jew-hatred based on the Koran or just its supplement. Instead, Islam’s ancient Jew-hatred was moved into a totally new context and considerably radicalized.

**FP:** If we are not to validate the Islamist interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, what alternative interpretations are being offered that are not Islamist, and who is offering them?

**Kuentzel:** Well, I am not a Muslim. I have studied the social reality of the various Islamic societies and note that as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century the ruler of the Ottoman Empire embarked on a modernization process based on the French model. The Tanzimat reforms of 1839 broke from the Koranic framework and set in train the secularization of Turkey. In 1957 Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia’s former president banned not only polygamy -giving religious grounds -but ensured women equal rights in divorce cases and guaranteed every woman whether married or not the right to free abortion in the first three month of pregnancy. In Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey, governments have been headed by women. Islamism is conducting a terrorist war against such tendencies. Its success over the past thirty years is really terrifying.

However, “this petrification of Arab-Muslim mentalities is not at all irremediable,” as the Tunisian philosopher Mezri Haddad puts it, “provided that Islamic thinkers show intellectual audacity. Since they cannot purge the Koran of its potentially antisemitic dross, they must closely examine this corpus with hermeneutical reason.” Haddad refuses to gloss over what the Koran really says. His idea is that it should be critically interpreted. I am sympathetic to his approach.

**FP:** In what ways would non-Islamist Muslims reject the antisemitic motifs that Islamists have imported from Nazism? What would be some of the Qur'anic features of this rejection?

**Kuentzel:** In 1936 in Egypt, the Muslim Brother's antisemitism met with a lot of resistance from mosque imams, who tried to stop them physically or have them taken to police stations. In 1938 the Rector of the Azhar Mosque, Mustafa al-Maragi, forbade Palestinian students at his institution from conducting any propaganda against Egyptian Jews. In the 1948 war, many Palestinian Arabs not only refrained from fighting themselves, but also did their best to prevent the Arab soldiers and the Mufti gangs from carrying out military actions because, in their view, agreement with the Jews was the best course for the Palestine Arab nation. They no more turned to the Koran to justify their humane behavior than Italian anti-Nazi resistance fighters referred to the Bible or Soviet Partisans to the Communist Manifesto. It is antisemitism, not resistance to it that requires legitimation.

**FP:** You mention Kemal Ataturk in the context of differing interpretations of the Qur'an, but actually his regime in Turkey simply outlawed expressions of political Islam, without offering an alternative Qur'anic understanding. This is one of the weaknesses of Turkish secularism that the Erdogan regime has exploited.

Consequently, is it really accurate to say that Ataturk offered an alternative vision of Islam, when what he really offered was and is regarded by many Turks and non-Turkish Muslims not as an alternative Islam, but as no Islam at all, or at most a restricted and stunted Islam?

**Kuentzel:** I haven't said that Ataturk offered an alternative vision of Islam. He separated state and religion and banished religion to where it belongs: the private sphere. There one could decide to pray fifteen times a day, five times or not at all.

Let me give an example from my daily teaching experience. My Hamburg students are aged between 20 and 25. As a rule I have about 25% Muslims, 50% Christians and 25% atheists. But what does Christian mean here? A mere 10% at most of the Christians admit to genuinely believing in God. The rest go to Church at Christmas because the family wants them to. And what about the Muslims? About 40% of those in my classes regularly go to pray in the Mosque. 40% of them regard religion as a social accessory. They don't take it especially seriously, but would never give it up. As for the other 20%, they have inwardly left Islam, but cannot let their families know for fear of being disowned. I have "Muslim" students who have declared, in front of the class and their Muslim fellows that they have inwardly left Islam. It is precisely this condition of freedom of religion, a condition that respects the rights of the individual in the matter, a condition granted to the Turks by Mustafa Kemal, that the Islamists are fighting against. We must defend it at all costs.

**FP:** Matthias Kuentzel, thank you for joining Frontpage Interview.

**Kuentzel:** It was my pleasure.

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