

# In the Straightjacket of Anti-Zionism

A critical review of Gilbert Achcar's *The Arabs and the Holocaust*

by *Matthias Küntzel and Colin Meade*

In almost every part of the world, since the end of the Second World War, “Nazi” has been a synonym for “criminal”. Not so, however, in the Arab world, where positive references to Hitler and the destruction of the Jews have been an accepted part of public discourse for decades. For this reason alone – but also in the light of the current upheavals in the region – the topic of Gilbert Achcar's recent book, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, is of great importance.

In the first part of his book, Achcar tackles the issue of “Arab Reactions to Nazism and Anti-Semitism, 1933-47”. A good half of this part is devoted to an account of the origins of the Islamist movement, described as the “reactionary and/or fundamentalist pan-Islamists”, in the Arab world. Further chapters deal with the attitude of the other political currents in existence in this period: the “Liberal Westernizers”, “Marxists” and “Nationalists”.

In the second part the author deals with “Arab Attitudes to the Jews and the Holocaust from 1948 to the Present”. The treatment of these matters is divided into three successive epochs, “The Nasser Years (1948-67)”, “The PLO Years (1967-88)” and “The Years of Islamic Resistances (1988 to the Present)”.

“A straightforward and logical structure”, thinks the reader, as he opens the book with eager anticipation. Alas, the experience of actually reading it confirms the verdict of two history professors, Stephen Howe and Jeffrey Herf, that “Achcar is a man at war with what he has written in his own book”<sup>1</sup> and “a combatant, and even victim, in such a war within his own pages”.<sup>2</sup>

Another way of putting it would be: this is a book in which an author from the political left seeks to protect the dogmas of Western anti-Zionism from the reality of Arab antisemitism.

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey Herf, ‘Not in Moderation’, *The New Republic*, November 1, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Howe, ‘The Arabs and the Holocaust’, *The Independent*, 14 May 2010.

## On the relationship between Nazism and pan-Islamism

Achcar is probably the first anti-Zionist author to describe and criticize the ideological affinity between National Socialism and Pan-Islamism in the 1930 and 40s. He emphasizes “the sympathy, ... that Islamic fundamentalists generally felt for Nazism, both in the Nazi period and later” and confirms what others have written before him: that the most important spiritual mentor of the Islamist movement was a pro-Nazi Egyptian religious scholar, Rashid Rida.<sup>3</sup> Rida “legitimized his sympathy for Nazism by treating it as the instrument of God’s will, sweeping aside heresies and false beliefs, corrupt versions of Islam among them, and thus clearing a path for the ultimate triumph of the Muhammadan revelation.”<sup>4</sup> The rationale for the affinity between Pan-Islamism and National Socialism “is plain” writes Achcar: “the common enemy was not Britain, as is too often believed, but the Jews.”<sup>5</sup> Achcar then moves on to a critical examination of three of Rida’s most prominent pupils.

The first is Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who “espoused the Nazis’ anti-Semitic doctrine”. His position, states Achcar, “is, down to Husseini’s eulogy of the Final Solution, perfectly consistent with Nazi anti-Semitism.”<sup>6</sup>

El-Husseini maintained this position until his death in 1974. As Achcar points out, he never concealed his “enthusiasm for Hitler” or his belief in the “Nazi notions of a world Jewish conspiracy”.<sup>7</sup>

Second comes Hassan al-Banna, founder and leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Here Achcar informs his readers about “the convergence of views and the close collaboration between the Muslim Brotherhood and the mufti”<sup>8</sup>. On the one hand, the Brotherhood operated “with the mufti’s blessing and

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<sup>3</sup> “The rather embarrassing fact is that Kuntzel’s analysis of al-Banna, Husseini, the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb and Islamism in general runs along the same main lines as Achcar’s own account of the Pan-Islamist reactionaries from Rashid Rida onward,” states historian Jeffrey Herf with reference to Matthias Kuntzel’s *Jihad and Jew-Hatred. Nazism, Islamism and the Roots of 9/11* (New York, Telos Press, 2007), translated by Colin Meade. See: <http://tnr.com/print/book/review/not-in-moderation>

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust. The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, New York (Henry Holt and Company) 2009 and London (Saqi) 2010, NY, p. 119; L, p. 117. Throughout these references, the first page number (NY) refers to the New York edition and the second (L) to the London edition.

<sup>5</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 127; L, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 156; L, p. 151

<sup>7</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 157; L, p. 152

<sup>8</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 326; L. p. 310, fn 226.

benefited from his popularity”, while, on the other, “[the Brotherhood] supported the mufti during his lifetime, treating him as the legitimate leader of the anti-Zionist struggle.”<sup>9</sup> Quite correctly, Achcar also notes that the Brotherhood’s antisemitism survived the end of the Nazi regime. “On November 2, 1945, ... Young Egypt and the Muslim Brothers organized attacks on Jewish stores and institutions – the first of their kind.”<sup>10</sup>

The third is Iz-al-Din al-Qassam, the first Palestinian jihadist who had ties to the Saudi Wahhabites and remains to this day the idol of Hamas. Again as regards Qassam and his supporters Achcar points out “the anti-Semitic affinities between Wahhabi-type fundamentalism and Nazism”. Achcar describes the action by the Qassamites on 15 April 1936 that ushered in the so-called Arab Revolt.

“It was 8:30 p.m. Cars were being stopped at a barrier made of barrels on a mountain road in the Nablus region. The barrier was under the surveillance of three armed men: one kept an eye on the road, another held the passengers of stopped vehicles in his gun sights, and the third relieved them of their cash. Then they asked their victims if there were Englishmen or Jews among them. The driver of a truck and his passenger, both Jews, were shot on the spot. Also present was a man who ‘proved to the band that he was German, a Hitlerite, and a Christian, swearing on Hitler’s honor that he was telling the truth. The three men released him... ‘for Hitler’s sake’ ... with thirty-five pounds sterling in his pockets.”<sup>11</sup>

In the second part of his book, Achcar returns to the issue of the current role of the Islamist movement: “The banners of preceding struggles, on which the adjectives ‘national,’ ‘popular,’ and ‘socialist’ were inscribed, have vanished almost without trace; their place has been taken by the standards of Islamic fundamentalist movements. At the same time, anti-Semitism, in both its traditional and Islamized variants as well as its Holocaust-denying corollary, has grown spectacularly in Arab political statements and Arab media.”<sup>12</sup> He provides the specific example of the Hamas Charter. “Articles 7 and 22 in

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<sup>9</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 163; L. p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 80; L. p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 136; L. p.133.

<sup>12</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 248; L. p. 236.

particular represent a condensed version of the Islamized anti-Semitic ravings cultivated by Rashid Rida, in the years just before his death in 1935.”<sup>13</sup>

So, Achcar explains to his readers, firstly, that a Nazi-like antisemitism appeared in the region well before the foundation of the State of Israel and, secondly, that the links between Islamism and National Socialism were not just tactical but reflected shared beliefs, in particular as regards antisemitism. And, finally, he makes it clear that the contemporary struggle against Israel is now being led by precisely those same Islamist currents that espoused and continue to espouse a Nazi-like hatred of Jews.

For “the enemies of Philistinism, in a word all thinking and feeling people”<sup>14</sup> an obvious conclusion flows from the facts Achcar provides: Israel, the Jewish state, not only has a right to exist, but also a right to defend itself against the antisemitically motivated aggression emanating from the region. However, it is precisely here that Achcar goes to “war with what he has written in his own book”. As if responding to an order from some inner Central Committee, in the second part of his book Achcar repudiates the evidence he has himself presented in the first part of the same book and turns to political agitation, the essential purpose of which is to justify an anti-Zionist alliance with the antisemites and Holocaust deniers of Hezbollah and Hamas. At one level, the absurdity of the effort is laughable, but it is also shocking in its intellectual irresponsibility.

### **Israel as the Enemy**

70 years after the Holocaust, it is extremely odd to find a professed anti-fascist such as Achcar denying the Jews of all peoples the right to their own state. Even so, Achcar neither gives reasons for nor even explains the strange anti-Zionist imperative that underpins his book. His book is written for a specific audience, whose assent to this imperative he takes for granted: that the Jewish state has no right to exist and must be fought.

He dogmatically asserts that, “Israel is the only European colonial settler state” and “the last major burning issue of European colonialism.”<sup>15</sup> The Jewish state, he insists, is not only “exclusively responsible for the Palestinian Catastrophe” of 1948 but “strives to destroy Muslim and Christian holy places, tries to

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<sup>13</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 250. L. p.237.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *Briefe aus den “Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbüchern”*, *Marx-Engelswerke Bd. 1*, p. 342.

<sup>15</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 26; L, p. 32.

impoverish the Palestinians and destroy their agriculture and economy, maltreats its own Palestinian citizens, etc.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Achcar rejects the two-state solution: he takes it as self-evident that there should never have been a Jewish state at all. He writes that acceptance of the 1947 UN partition plan by the Palestinians “would have been a dishonorable surrender”<sup>17</sup> and treats the half-hearted Palestinian supporters of such a solution, such as the PLO politician Abu Iyad, either as opportunists or traitors. He thus derides the present head of the PLO, Mahmoud Abbas, as “the best Palestinian friend of Israel and the United States.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course, even a politically biased author can write a good book, as long as he sticks to the facts. Here, however, the anti-Zionist framework provides the overarching structure into which the factual material is ruthlessly forced. Whatever does not fit is discarded. The anti-Zionist framework operates through a simplistic black/white model: while the Israelis are deemed responsible for everything that goes wrong in the region, the Palestinians and their Islamist vanguard are merely victims, for whom Achcar tirelessly seeks excuses.

### **Example No 1: Arab antisemitism**

Can anyone imagine an author from the political left criticising Nazi antisemitism primarily because it discredited and complicated the necessary struggle against Jewish intrigues? Not us. Regretfully, we must note that Achcar uses precisely this argument when it comes to contemporary Arab antisemitism.

Achcar criticises Arab antisemitism not because it envisages the murder of Jews and renders the Middle East conflict insoluble, but because it impedes the necessary struggle against Israel: “These anti-Semitic ravings or mindless denials of the Holocaust, far from undermining the Israeli cause as their authors intend, in fact help Israel produce anti-Arab propaganda”.<sup>19</sup>

While in the first part of his book Achcar set himself the task of describing and criticising the historical antisemitism of the Islamists, in the second part, he

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<sup>16</sup> “All this, unfortunately, is literally true” writes Achcar about this list of crimes drawn from his sources. See Achcar, NY, p. 248; L. p. 235.

<sup>17</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 142; L. p.138.

<sup>18</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 160 and p. 285; L. p. 154 and 270.

<sup>19</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 182; L. p. 176.

derides those who describe and criticise contemporary Islamist antisemitism as conscious or unconscious agents of Israel. He thus characterizes the Middle East Media Research Institute MEMRI, which documents these “ravings”, as “a function of the Arab-Israeli conflict, acting like a subdepartment of the Israeli propaganda services” and Professor Wistrich, possibly the world’s most renowned expert on antisemitism, as “another professional of the anti-Arab propaganda war.”<sup>20</sup>

Achcar does not criticize MEMRI or Professor Wistrich for any mistranslation or misinterpretation, but because Israel allegedly benefits from their work. Within his mindset, this “propaganda trap” can only be avoided by ignoring Arab antisemitism or by excusing it.

Achcar has decided in favour of excusing, rather than ignoring it. He does not deny the existence of ugly expressions of Arab antisemitism but instead makes Israel responsible for them. Thus, he sees in Arab antisemitism “... fantasy-laden expressions ... 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.”<sup>21</sup>

However, were he to examine these “expressions” more closely – an activity he would consider “propagandist” - he would soon see that they are violent fantasies directed at the destruction of the Jews or Israel. Such fantasies cannot be excused as merely a “response” to anything that may or may not have happened in the real world.

Achcar, who only a few pages previously had been describing the Nazi-influenced history of this antisemitism, now wants to hear no more talk about possible connections between “European” and “Arab” antisemitism. “The most important question facing us here concerns the real weight of anti-Semitism in today’s Arab world. And this question brings another in its wake, which involves the very definition of anti-Semitism: How much aversion is imputable to anti-Semitism in the strict sense? 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 ...?”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 182 and 213; L. 175 and 204.

<sup>21</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 256; L. p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 275; L, p. 261.

It is, of course, true that the context of Arab antisemitism is very different from the context of Nazi antisemitism. However, this makes the similarity between today's slogans, cartoons and fantasies and those of the Nazis all the more striking. But it is precisely these similarities, which Achcar is determined not to see. Or perhaps is unable to see? Is it because he himself demonizes Israel that he cannot recognize the Israel-related antisemitism of contemporary Islamists? As Sigmund Freud observed, "A participant in a delusion will not of course recognise it as such".<sup>23</sup>

Achcar even manages to find excuses for the dissemination of Hitler's textbook for the Holocaust, the so-called *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. "There is a qualitative difference", he claims, "between a delusive, anti-Semitic approach that believes, or seeks to make others believe, that the leaders of the Jews or the 'Jewish race' are conspiring against the rest of the world, and an equally delusive but not racist approach that seeks consolation by mobilizing a conspiracy theory to explain Zionist successes." And that's not all: he even deplores the failure of other authors to "make the necessary distinction between the anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist reading of the Russian forgery."<sup>24</sup>

Given that the Protocols constantly talk not about Zionists, but about "Jewry", which, the Protocols claim, is seeking to take control of the world, Achcar's attempt to defend Islamist propagators of the Protocols from the charge of antisemitism is truly bizarre. One might just as well recommend an "anti-Zionist reading" of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, another book with a wide circulation in the Middle East, and one which has an explicitly anti-Zionist orientation: "Zionism", wrote Hitler, "does not intend to build a Jewish state in Palestine". It "only wants an organizational centre for (its) international world-swindling, furnished with its own state rights."<sup>25</sup>

The whitewashing of the Protocols serves a political agenda: Achcar is intent on protecting the reputation of Gamal Abdul Nasser and the "1950s-60s Arab nationalism, with its socialist, anti-imperialist bent". It is, however, a well-established fact – as Achcar admits - that Nasser not only had the Protocols distributed by agencies of the state he controlled, but also explicitly recommended the Protocols to readers and claimed that, "three hundred

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<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe Bd. IX, Fragen der Gesellschaft. Ursprünge der Religion*, Frankfurt a. M. (Fischer ), p. 213,

<sup>24</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 208; L. p. 199.

<sup>25</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf Vol.I*, Munich (Verlag Franz Eher Nachfolger), 1934, p. 356.

Zionists ... govern the fate of the European continent“.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Achcar hastens to Nasser’s rescue: “Nothing but ignorance is to blame here.” For him, it is not the fact that, 15 years after the Holocaust, a world-famous head of state praised Hitler’s favourite book, but that “Nasser could in 1958 have been so ignorant of the history of this text”, which Achcar finds, “quite simply disgraceful.”<sup>27</sup>

Achcar’s attempt to wave away Nasser’s antisemitism as a deficiency in his education, a kind of “mistake”, shows how little he understands about antisemitism. Antisemitic conspiracy theories are not just confused fantasies but guides to action, theories which materially affect state policy. “Our war against Israel” declared Nasser in 1965, “is the continuation of our war against colonialism.” Not only does Achcar refuse to relate this policy to Nasser’s promotion of the Protocols, but he even lauds this statement as demonstrating Nasser’s “distance from Nazism” und “rejection of anti-Semitism.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Example No. 2: Arab Holocaust denial**

The title of Gilbert Achcar’s book is *The Arabs and the Holocaust*. However, he does not deal with what Arab Holocaust deniers actually say, but insults those who do so. “I will let others savor the perverse satisfaction of cataloging ... all the inanities about the Holocaust that have been uttered ... in the Arab world.”<sup>29</sup>

Such “inanities about the Holocaust” are, of course, really there in abundance. However, Achcar believes they should only be described if doing so serves what he considers the “right” political ends. In this case, he considers reporting reality to be “perverse”, since it might serve the “wrong” political ends.

His fundamental concern is thus not with the issues of antisemitism and Holocaust denial as such, but with promoting the notion that Israel is responsible for both of them; his anti-Nazism is subordinate to his anti-Zionism.

As regard Holocaust denial, his line of reasoning is this: he claims that Israel has constantly attempted to overcome crises of “legitimacy” through “the political exploitation of the memory of the Holocaust.” As evidence, Achcar refers to

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<sup>26</sup> As quoted by Achcar, NY, pp. 205-6; L. pp. 197-98

<sup>27</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 206; L. p. 198

<sup>28</sup> Achcar, NY, pp. 215-16; L. pp. 205-06

<sup>29</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 181; L. p. 175.

1982, when, he argues, Israel's international image suffered severe damage in the wake of the invasion of Lebanon so that it resorted to invoking the Holocaust on a particularly massive scale in order to revive its reputation. It was, according to Achcar, this alleged propaganda offensive that first provoked Holocaust denial in the Arab world: "The denial in the Arab world ... began with the invasion of Lebanon in 1982."<sup>30</sup>

It is true that in 1982 Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin compared Arafat, at that time based in Beirut, to Hitler. However, this discredited Begin particularly in Israel itself. "Many Israelis thought that Begin's Holocaust obsession led to the unfortunate adventure [the Lebanese war]," wrote Peter Novick, a favourite author of Achcar's.<sup>31</sup> This hardly amounts to an Israeli propaganda offensive.

Still more ridiculous is Achcar's claim that Arab Holocaust denial started in 1982. The documents available show that Holocaust denial was already present in the Nazi's Arabic broadcasts as early as 1943, which raged against "the Jews' cursed lies", "the lies ... of the Jews who are trying to gain the sympathy of the world through their tears."<sup>32</sup>

In May 1945, the Jerusalem-based newspaper, *Filastin*, took up the theme: "The Jews have grossly overstated the number of their victims in Europe in order to gain the world's support for their imagined catastrophe [the Jewish state in Israel]." In September 1945, the Egyptian newspaper *Akbhar al-Yawm* declared: "There was Nazi tyranny, but it did not harm the Jews any more than Germans".<sup>33</sup> In their ground-breaking study, *From Empathy to Denial. Arab Responses to the Holocaust*, Litvak and Webman go on to show that Holocaust denial has remained a part of public discourse in Egypt since that time.

Achcar, however, subordinates reality to his political belief-system. He presents Holocaust denial as the desperate and therefore understandable reaction of an oppressed group to the onslaught of an all-powerful Israel. "Are all forms of Holocaust denial the same?" he asks rhetorically. "Should such denial, when it

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<sup>30</sup> 'Gilbert Achcar, Arab attitudes to the Holocaust', at [www.SocialistWorker.org](http://www.SocialistWorker.org), May 20, 2010. See also Achcar, NY, p. 256; L, p. 243.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Novick, *Nach dem Holocaust*, München (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag) 2003, p. 215.

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, New Haven (Yale University Press) 2009, p. 177.

<sup>33</sup> Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial. Arab Responses to the Holocaust*, London (Hurst & Company), p. 52.

comes from oppressors, not be distinguished from denial in the mouths of the oppressed, as the racism of ruling whites is distinguished from that of subjugated blacks?”<sup>34</sup>

This argument encapsulates many of the problems of his “anti-imperialist” worldview. Firstly, Achcar seeks to bury, rather than honestly consider, what he clearly finds a most unwelcome thought: that the crisis of the Arab world may not in fact be caused by the existence and actions of an *external* “imperialism” embodied in the Jewish state of Israel, but by the prevalence of irrational ideas, and in particular of rampant antisemitism, *within* that world.

Second, Achcar establishes a regime of double standards, under which words and deeds that would otherwise be outrageous become acceptable when said and done by the “oppressed”. Holocaust deniers - insofar as they belong to what he considers an “oppressed group” – are thus given a moral *carte blanche*. Here he is making the very same mistake for which he had strongly criticised the left in the first part of the book: “To abandon critical thinking when dealing with the [alleged! – CM/MK] victims of imperialism”.<sup>35</sup>

Third, he brands the Arabs as essentially stupid people who cannot be expected to know what they are doing. When Arabs deny the Holocaust, he has stated in an interview, “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.”<sup>36</sup> Achcar permits himself to do what he would never do to a French or an English counterpart: refuse to treat them as human beings responsible for their own words and deeds.

There is, however, more here than just another irresponsible expression of unconditional solidarity with the Islamist comrades who share Achcar’s fundamentalist criticism of Israel. Achcar’s statements express a cynical attitude to the Holocaust itself.

Arab Holocaust denial, writes Achcar “is ... an expression of what I call the ‘anti-Zionism of the fools’.”<sup>37</sup> This phrase recalls a dictum which is commonly attributed to the German socialist leader August Bebel, who, in 1893, described

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<sup>34</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 276; L. p. 261.

<sup>35</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 125; L. p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Israel’s Propaganda War: Blame the Grand Mufti’. Gilbert Achcar Interviewed by George Miller, at <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/achcar120510p.html> .

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert Achcar, ‘Arabs have a complex relationship with the Holocaust’, *The Guardian*, May 10, 2010.

antisemitism as the “socialism of fools” – a far-reaching mistake that was perhaps understandable 50 years before the Holocaust, but that cannot be acceptable 70 years after it, when we know that antisemitism is not a mere verbal excess, but a guide to murderous action.

The very fact that Achcar dates the start of the Shoah to 1933<sup>38</sup> shows that he has as little idea about the Holocaust as he does about the antisemitism which drove it. Otherwise, his claim that Zionist Jews welcome antisemitism is inexplicable. Achcar asserts that Israel observed the spectacular rise in Arab antisemitism “with great satisfaction”, and that an Arab Holocaust denier such as the Jordanian Dr. Ibrahim Alloush is “of course, much appreciated” by Israeli authors and institutes.<sup>39</sup> Here we find Achcar playing a variation on the historical-revisionist fantasy that, in the 1930s, the Zionists welcomed the Nazis’ Jewish policies – a slander drawn from the arsenal of the Holocaust deniers and antisemities.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, Achcar has declared in an interview with the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* that, “I have the necessary sensitivity to address the [Holocaust] subject.”<sup>41</sup> He feels able to assert this despite the fact that he is the first academic to compare the Holocaust survivors who settled in Palestine after 1945 to the radioactive waste exported by industrialised countries to the third world: “Certain states sought to resolve the problem of the Holocaust survivors at the Palestinians’ cost – as some states nowadays seek to rid themselves of their radioactive waste by exporting it to poor countries.”<sup>42</sup> This nasty attitude to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust is compounded by his use of his own half-hearted critique of Holocaust denial to support his anti-Zionism: “Holocaust denial in the Arab world is wrong, misleading and damaging to the

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<sup>38</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 2; L. p. 10: „I have construed the Shoah ... broadly in the following pages“ by „including the entire period of Jewish persecution ... that began with Hitler’s assumption of power in 1933.“

<sup>39</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 248 and p. 266; L, p. 236 and p. 252.

<sup>40</sup> See Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial. Arab Responses to the Holocaust*, London (Hurst & Company) 2009, Chapter 8: ‘The Alleged Nazi-Zionist Cooperation’ pp. 243-70.

<sup>41</sup> The interview with Eldad Beck was published on 27.April 2010 in *Yedioth Ahronoth*. An English translation is available at: <http://www.zcommunications.org/the-league-against-denial-by-gilbert-achcar>

<sup>42</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 21; L, p. 27.

Arab and Palestinian cause.<sup>43</sup> Does he think that the denial of this crime has absolutely no significance for its victims?

### **Falsified quotations**

It is really not so easy to distort the reality of Arab antisemitism to the extent necessary to make it compatible with a “progressive” anti-Zionist front. When standard academic practices fail him, Achcar resorts to other means, selecting and underlining whatever supports his prejudices and leaving out or dismissing the importance of everything else. A random examination of his use of quotations has brought to light several significant distortions. For example:

Achcar writes: “Arab opposition [to the Peel Commission’s partition plan of 1937 – the first proposal for a two-state solution], in both Palestine and elsewhere, was virtually unanimous. Even Raghib al-Nashashibi ... expressed his opposition.”<sup>44</sup> This is sourced to a standard work that appeared in 1977, Yehoshua Porath’s *The Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1929-1939* (pp. 228-30).

However, what is actually written there is: “Since the winter of 1937 strong rumours were afoot that partition would be recommended. At that stage the [Nashashibi’s] National Defence Party did not conceal their support for the principle of partition, and they even organized meetings and used other propaganda means to win public support for this principle. This positive attitude prevailed also immediately upon the publication of the Commission’s report. In private, two leaders of the Party, Raghib al-Nashashibi and Ya’qub Farraj, told the HC [High Commissioner] that they were in favour of the principle of partition.” However rather quickly, Porath continues, “a *volte-face* took place and the National Defence Party sent an official memorandum to the HC, condemning partition in very strong language. Various factors had led to this. First of all strong pressure was exerted on the Nashashibis to identify themselves with the HAC’s [High Arab Committee] reaction. Threats were made on their lives, and indeed during the summer of 1937 various moderates and Nashashibi-supporting notables were assaulted or murdered. Secondly,

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<sup>43</sup> Arab Attitudes to the Holocaust, Interview with Gilbert Achcar at <http://socialistworker.org/print/2010/05/20/arab-attitudes-to-the-holocaust>

<sup>44</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 141; L, p. 137.

they were surprised when allies or friends of Britain, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, came out against Partition.”<sup>45</sup>

The distortion introduced by Achcar is not a minor detail, especially given that he himself is a committed opponent of a two-state solution, the subject of the quotation. He describes Palestinian opposition to the Peel Commission’s partition plan as “virtually unanimous”, but omits to mention that, according to his source, this “unanimity” was enforced by murder and intimidation, since at the outset his star witness, Raghib al-Nashashibi, took precisely the opposite position from the one Achcar presents to his readers.

Second example: Achcar quotes Tom Segev to support his point about Israel’s “political exploitation of the Eichmann affair” – the Eichmann trial of 1961: “Tom Segev offers an admirable description of the uses to which the trial was put: ‘Ben Gurion had two goals: One was to remind the countries of the world that the Holocaust obligated them to support the only Jewish state on earth. The second was to impress the lessons of the Holocaust on the people of Israel, especially the younger generation. ... The trial, he said, could unmask other Nazi criminals and perhaps, also, their links with several Arab rulers.’”<sup>46</sup> Here Achcar creates the impression that exposing the links between Arabs and the Nazis was one of Ben Gurion’s key “lessons of the Holocaust” and central goals of the trial.

However, reference to the original reveals that Achcar has inserted three dots that distort Segev’s account of Ben Gurion’s real aim.

In the original, Segev describes Ben Gurion’s “lessons of the Holocaust” in the missing passage thus: “In an interview with the *New York Times*, a draft of which he apparently approved before publication, Ben-Gurion explained that the world must learn from the trial where hatred of the Jews had led – and then it must be made ashamed of itself. He called the extermination machine, ‘a soap factory.’ He also noted that not only Germany was guilty – Britain’s refusal to allow Jews to immigrate to Palestine had led to hundreds of thousands of deaths.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Y. Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement. From Riots to Rebellion, Volume Two 1929-1939*, London (Frank Cass) 1977, p. 229.

<sup>46</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 211, L. pp. 201-02.

<sup>47</sup> Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million*, New York (Henry Holt) 1991, p. 327.

Achcar must have known what he was doing and the effect he would create by directly linking “the lessons of the Holocaust” with “several Arab rulers”. Without the claim that Israel exploits the Holocaust, his argument that Arab Holocaust denial is only a reaction to this abuse disintegrates. However, Tom Segev’s “admirable description” does not support the charge of Holocaust abuse.

Secondly, the author repeatedly attempts to show that the object of his hatred – Israel – welcomes antisemitism. “Anti-Semitism”, writes Achcar, “is, in general, Zionism’s most powerful ‘propelling force’.”<sup>48</sup> However, this thesis too conflicts with Segev’s description, which emphasizes Ben Gurion’s opposition to antisemitism. So Achcar cuts and pastes. Thirdly, Ben Gurion’s reference to the clash between Zionism and the British fits badly into Achcar’s notion that Israel is “the only European colonial settler state”, so out that reference goes.

Falsification of sources for propaganda purposes: is this the notion of scholarship promoted by the London School of Oriental and African Studies, at which Achcar teaches?

This is not the only occasion when Achcar misuses a quotation from Segev to demonstrate an alleged Israeli obsession with links between the Nazis and the Arabs – in this case in relation to the historical role of Amin el-Husseini. “According to Tom Segev, the wall devoted to Hussein’s relations with the Nazis in the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem leaves the impression that ‘there is much in common between the Nazis’ plan to destroy the Jews and the Arabs’ enmity to Israel’.”<sup>49</sup> This quotation comes from a text from 1991. A few pages later Achcar quotes another article by Segev, this time from September 2008 – 17 years later – that appeared in the *New York Times*. Here Segev wrote the following about the placement of the photo of Hitler and el-Husseini in Yad Vashem Museum: “In recent years the photo ... has been reduced in scale and removed to its proper historical context (a section in the museum that deals with volunteers from several nations who enlisted in Hitler’s *Waffen SS*)”.<sup>50</sup> It goes without saying that Achcar does not mention this later remark by Segev, although he must know about it, since he quotes other material from the article in which it appears. The older quotation, of course, serves his purpose much better ...

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<sup>48</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 137; L, p. 134.

<sup>49</sup> Achcar, Ny, p. 165; L, p. 159.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Segev, ‘Courting Hitler’, *New York Times*, September 28, 2008.

## Achcar's Success

Despite all this, Achcar's book has appeared in several languages and been widely praised. On the back of the book, we find glowing endorsements from Professors Avi Shlaim (University of Oxford), Michael R. Marrus (University of Toronto), Rashid Khalidi (Columbia University) and Francis R. Nicosia (University of Vermont) and the author and historian Peter Novick.

Indeed, in May 2010 Achcar was invited to give a publicly sponsored lecture at the Berlin-based Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) at which his book was hailed as "ground-breaking". His book was "a factual and solid piece of research of major significance", declared ZMO director Ulrike Freitag.<sup>51</sup>

In November 2010 he was invited to the reputable "Lessons and Legacies Conference On The Holocaust" in Florida. The theme of his talk: "An Assessment of Holocaust Denial in the Arab world since the 1980s". In May 2011, finally, he spoke on the topic "perceptions of the Eichmann trial in the Arab states" at a conference in Berlin organized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center of Advanced Holocaust Studies and the Berlin-based "Topographie des Terrors" organization.

How can the success of this book and its author be explained? Leaving aside the gullibility of an academic milieu in which historical truth has increasingly been replaced by "narratives" and the transmission of facts by post-modern relativism<sup>52</sup>, this book clearly meets an urgent need: it helps a particular group of academics to rationalize their own intellectual self-deception.

Declaring solidarity with movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah, despite the fact that they deny the Holocaust and base their policies on Nazi-like antisemitism, exposes the left-wing anti-Zionists whom Achcar represents and for whom he writes not only to external criticism, but also to inner tensions. Achcar's book is intended to enable his political allies to overcome those tensions and so ensure the smooth continuation of the anti-Israel alliance between "anti-fascists" and "anti-racists" on the one hand and Islamist antisemites and Holocaust deniers on the other.

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<sup>51</sup> Samir Grees, 'Krieg der Narrative', at [www.Qantara.de](http://www.Qantara.de), July 5, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Achcar has explained his book's sub-title thus, "I refer here to the notion of 'narrative' as the recitation of history as developed by post-modernism": <http://www.iire.org/en/home-mainmenu-1/15-fellows/185-gilbert-achcar-why-holocaust-denial-is-on-the-rise-in-the-arab-world.html> .

Evidently, since this alliance is essentially problematic, Achcar cannot achieve his goal of preserving it by honestly addressing reality. Instead, he attributes the problems within the alliance to external causes. We have identified Achcar's central pseudo-explanation: Israeli propaganda. However, he also resorts to a second such explanation, also with far reaching implications: Islamophobia.

True, the author describes the “unprecedented expansion of religiosity”, expressed in rising support for movements such as Hamas, among the Palestinians as “a regression”.<sup>53</sup> For anti-Zionist reasons, however, he is ready to praise the local engines of that regression for their supposed evolutionary potential: “Thanks to the indispensable dose of pragmatism without which organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah could not have attained their present size and played the roles they now play, they can learn to leave their Islamized anti-Semitism behind.”<sup>54</sup>

To cast doubt on this scenario, Achcar suggests, is to fall prey to the “huge increase in Islamophobia” which he deems – in place of antisemitism – to be “the true European racism of our day” and which “has found a means of large-scale ‘sublimation’ in hostility to what has come to be called ‘Islamism’ or even ‘Islamofascism’.”<sup>55</sup>

In other words, according to Achcar, anyone who pays overly critical attention to the “regression” embodied in the Islamist movements is not sincerely concerned about that regression, but is merely “sublimating” racist sentiments. If one accepts this argument, it is, incidentally, hard to see why Achcar's harsh critique of Pan-Islamism in the first part of the book does not qualify as equally racist.

At the same time, Achcar wants to stifle any serious engagement with the many new studies that throw light on the nature of Islamistically-motivated antisemitism and its relationship with National Socialism. Even friendly critics have noted how aggressively and summarily he dismisses these studies as a “flood of hate-filled anti-Arab and anti-Muslim texts ... in the context of a new Islamophobia”.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 245; L, p. 233.

<sup>54</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 253-55; L, p. 242

<sup>55</sup> Achcar, NY, pp. 282-3; L, p. 268.

<sup>56</sup> Achcar, NY, p. 168; L, p. 162.

On top of being agents of Zionism, Achcar here smears critics of Arab antisemitism a second time as being motivated by “Islamophobia”, in the face of which it would be petty and sectarian for the left to break the alliance with the Islamists. Were anyone within his political milieu to start seriously studying and considering the implications of the work of these critics, they would, Achcar implies, be giving in to racist Islamophobia.

Such amalgams are rhetorically effective, but they have this disadvantage: in using them Achcar places himself firmly on the side of Islamist regression in the Arab world.

And this at a time when uprisings are shaking the Arab-Islamic world, from Tunis to Teheran! The driving force behind these upheavals is not a bugbear called Israel nor a fantasised “Western imperialism”, nor, indeed, an absence of “true Islam”, but real problems such as a lack of freedom and democracy, arbitrary rule, unemployment, sexual oppression and discrimination against women. If there is to be lasting and substantial change, however, these movements will have to take a critical look at aspects of their own societies, including rampant antisemitism and a fondness for conspiracy theories. This process is likely to involve criticism of at least some aspects of Islamic tradition.

There is some hope that the revolutionary experience will strengthen the self-awareness and sense of responsibility of individuals so that the demand for a Jewish scapegoat recedes. On the other hand, antisemitic Islamist actors such as the Iranian regime, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are eyeing their chance. It is precisely at such a time – a time of change and a new beginning – that it becomes more important than ever to raise the issues of the roots and potential consequences of Arab antisemitism and Holocaust denial in a responsible and scholarly way. Achcar’s book does not help with this urgent task. It is part of the problem.

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