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The Wannsee Legacy: Lessons for Genocide Prevention

Remarks by Matthias Kuentzel

Let me please start with Ms Fanny England, an active survivor of the Holocaust and a friend of mine. She grew up in Germany/Cologne and lives now south of Tel Aviv. Fanny wrote in a letter: “As a twenty-year-old, on 8 May 1945 I was liberated from hell and tried to find my family, but without success. Eventually I had to accept that my father had lost his life in the Warsaw Ghetto, while my mother and ten-year-old brother had been poisoned in the gas chambers at Belzec along with my grandmother, aunts and cousins. Two brothers, aged 15 and 13, had been shot in Belarussia not far from Minsk and buried in shallow graves in 1942, but in 1943 the corpses had been dug up and burned - their ashes scattered to the four winds. In May 1947 I came to Israel and married in order to create a new family as a replacement for the murdered one that had fallen victim to Jew-hatred.”

I know the photos and the faces of Fanny’s murdered siblings and parents and I want to contrast her personal letter with the bare numbers and the monstrous language of the Wannsee-protocol which talks about “the complete clearing up of the problem” and

continues: “this final solution of the *European Jewish question* concerns about 11 million Jews, distributed among the various countries.”¹

However, the Final Solution was not limited to Europe. In 1941, the 700.000 Jews of the Middle East attracted Hitler’s attention as well.² As Hitler envisaged it, after the assault on the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht would also occupy the Caucasus and so open the way to the Middle East. Then Iran, Iraq and Egypt would be conquered and the British Empire destroyed from the south. Pro-German movements would prepare for the German invasions of that countries. Part of this scenario was the killing of the Jews.

At the end of November 1941 – in the run-up to the Wannsee-Conference - Hitler received Hajj Amin el-Husseini, the Grand Mufti and leader of the Palestinians. On this occasion Hitler stated that, after the defeat of the Soviet Union, “the hour of liberation” would arrive for the Arab world. “The German goal would then be the annihilation of the Jews ... living in the Arab region.”³ These were’t mere words.

By summer 1942 the Nazis had drawn up concrete plans to murder the Jews of the Yishuv. They expected their genocidal endeavor to be substantially assisted by Arab collaborators. Therefore, the SS Einsatzkommando for Palestine, which was set up in Athens by the summer of 1942 in order to direct this genocide was staffed by only 17 Germans - waiting there for

¹ Protocol of the Wannsee conference, p. 5 and 10; emphasis: MK.

² Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, New Haven (Yale University Press) p.7.

³ Klaus Gensicke, *Der Mufti von Jerusalem und die Nationalsozialisten*, Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft) 2007, p. 61.

Rommel to clear the way to Palestine. And indeed, as Rommel's Afrikakorps pushed eastwards during the summer of 1942, the Germans registered growing pro-Nazi sentiment all across the Middle East. "There is no reason to claim that the anti-Semitic potential of Lithuanian, Latvian or Ukrainian nationalists should have been stronger than that of Arabs expecting the German Wehrmacht", emphasize the German historians Mallmann and Cüppers.⁴

Persia was a more difficult place. You may recall that the name Iran means "Country of Aryans". Thus, a long-lasting controversy among German racist ideologues sprang up over whether Persian Jews were "racially" Persian and should therefore be categorised as "non-Semites" or even "Aryans". Adolf Eichmann brought this debate to an abrupt end on December 8, 1942. It is clear from Eichmann's letter that he intended to show no mercy to the native Iranian Jews, who numbered around 60,000. "In the light of the above remarks", he concludes his letter to the Foreign Office, "no grounds exist for recognising the equal status of the Jews with Iranians as recognised in Iran in the countries within Germany's sphere of control."⁵ His euphemistically formulated advice could lead to only one conclusion: as soon as Iran came under German control, the Jews of Iran too would be deported to death camps and murdered.

Let me summarize my first remark. The Wannsee protocol dealt with the „European Jewish question“. Adolf Hitler, however,

⁴ Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers, *Halbmond und Hakenkreuz. Das Dritte Reich, die Araber und Palästina*, Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft) 2006, p. 164.

⁵ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Eichmann an das Auswärtige Amt, Betrifft: Juden iranischer Staatsangehörigkeit, Berlin, den 8. Dezember 1942, R 99422, Inland II A-B Juden im Iran 41-44.

wanted to kill the Jews of the Middle East as well. Pro-German Muslims were designated to do the dirty work. But there was a problem which brings me to my second point.

It was understood that German-style antisemitism would have little resonance in the Middle East. “The level of education of the broad masses is not advanced enough for the understanding of the race theory”, complained a leading German Nazis in Egypt in 1933. “An understanding of the Jewish threat has not yet been awakened here.”⁶ Later, the German embassy in Tehran submitted the same complaint to Berlin. “The broad masses lack a feeling for the race idea”, explained a member of the embassy in January 1942. Thus, he recommended to lay “all the emphasis on the religious motif in our propaganda in the Islamic world. This is the only way to win over the Orientals.”⁷

But how exactly could Nazi Germany of all countries conduct a religious propaganda campaign? The German ambassador at Tehran, Erwin Ettel had an idea. “The way to directly connect up with Shiite ideas is through the treatment of the Jewish question, which the Muslim perceives in religious terms and which, precisely for this reason, makes him susceptible to National Socialism on religious grounds”, Ettel recommended to the German Foreign Office. “A way to foster this (anti-Jewish) development would be to highlight Muhammad’s struggle against the Jews in the old days and that of the Führer in modern times.

⁶ Gudrin Krämer, *Minderheit, Millet, Nation? Die Juden in Ägypten 1914-1952*, Wiesbaden (Verlag Otto Harrassowitz) 1982, p. 278.

⁷ Quoted in: Matthias Küntzel, *Die Deutschen und der Iran. Geschichte und Gegenwart einer verhängnisvollen Freundschaft [Germany and Iran. Past and Present of a Fateful Friendship]*, Berlin (wjs-Verlag) 2009, p. 54.

By, additionally, identifying the British and the Jews, an exceptionally effective anti-English propaganda campaign can be conducted among the Shiite people.”⁸

Ettel’s proposal shows that the Nazis sought to use religion to achieve what they had been unable to achieve with their racist idea: the creation of an implacable hostility to the Jews.

This anti-Jewish incitement built on the traditional, Islamically-prescribed exclusion of the Jews. It was radicalised by Nazi propaganda, the crucial medium for which was a short-wave radio channel that, since 1939, broadcast Goebbels’ antisemitism from Germany to the Middle East.

This radio channel disseminated the Nazi ideology in a multitude of languages to many parts of the world. The Orient Department, with 80 employees, was its largest foreign-language department, catering to Arabs, Turks, Persians and Indians.

We know from many contemporary reports that, at a time when people mainly listened to the radio in town squares or in bazaars and coffee houses, the Nazi broadcast was very popular. “Even if we do broadcast in Persian”, wrote Reader Bullard, the British Ambassador in Tehran, in 1940, “we cannot hope to rival the Germans in interest, as their more violent, abusive style, with exaggerated claims ... appeals to the Persian public.”⁹

Let me summarize my second point: Radio programs in Muslim languages – broadcast between 1939 and 1945 several times a day - served not only the purpose of preparing the arrival of the

⁸ Matthias Küntzel, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

⁹ Reader Bullard, *Letters from Tehran*, London/New York 1991, p. 28.

German army but also of inciting the hatred of Jews. One example: In July 1942, on the eve of Rommels expected invasion of Cairo – only six month after the Wannsee conference – the Axis radio addressed the Egyptian people as follows: “Kill the Jews, burn their property, destroy their stores, annihilate these base supporters of British imperialism. Your sole hope of salvation lies in annihilating the Jews before they annihilate you.”¹⁰ This brings me to my last remark.

The Nazi radio ceased operation in April 1945. But it was only after that date that its frequencies of hate really began to reverberate in the Arab world. I cannot go into details today but if you study this issue you will find a striking similarity between the Jew-hatred of the Nazis’ Arab propaganda and the Jew-hatred of Islamists today. At the end of 1941, Hans Frank, a leading Nazi official, declared : “We must annihilate the Jews wherever we meet them and whenever it is at all possible.”¹¹ In 1944, the Mufti of Jerusalem repeated this message via the Nazi transmitter: „Kill the Jews wherever you find them. This pleases God, history and religion.”¹² In 1946, after the war, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, praised the Mufti as follows: „O Amin! What a great, stubborn, terrific, wonderful man you are! ...Germany and Hitler are gone, but Amin Al-Hussaini will continue the struggle.”¹³ My last quote is from 2009: “Oh Allah, take this oppressive, Jewish, Zionist band of people. Oh Allah,

¹⁰ Jeffrey Herf, op. cit., p. 126.

¹¹ Ian Kershaw, Hitler 1936-1945, Stuttgart (Deutsche Verlagsanstalt), p. 652,

¹² Jeffrey Herf, op. cit., p. 213.

¹³ Herf, op. cit., p. 244.

count their numbers, and kill them, down to the very last one.”¹⁴ This appeal stems from a former friend of a former mayor of this city – Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the most prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood today.

It was the Wannsee Conference which “counted” the Jews’ number in order “to kill them, down to the very last one”, indeed. This conference decided on a crime which was and will remain unparalleled. The echo of Wannsee, however, still exists and also the willingness to propagate and to prepare for a new Holocaust.

Our remembrance of the Wannsee Conference would lose much of its value if it did not also serve to sharpen our attention about the contemporary threats to the Jews and the Jewish State of Israel. I would therefore like to end my statement again with Fanny Englard’s words: “Here in Israel, many Holocaust survivors created new families to replace those that were murdered. However, we did not create these new families in order to sacrifice them in the wars repeatedly inflicted on us by the Jew-hatred of the Mufti of Jerusalem and Hitler’s Islamist heirs... This Jew-hatred compels us to engage in a fight for life; this is not a war to kill others, but a fight for life to secure a safe future for the new families. Did we survive and found a new family in order to sacrifice them to the same Jew-hatred again?”

¹⁴ Paul Berman, *The Flight of the Intellectuals*, New York (Melville House) 2010, p. 92.