

The Roots of Antisemitism in the Middle East: New Debates¹

by Matthias Küntzel

“When I witnessed the events in Imbaba, I realized [the Jews were behind them],” wrote journalist Safaa Saleh on May 13, 2011 in the Egyptian government newspaper *Al-Gumhuriyya* following clashes between Copts and Muslims in Cairo’s Imbaba district that had claimed twelve lives. “There is no disaster in the world that was not caused by the Jews”, declared Saleh, calling in evidence a star witness: “Hitler said, ‘I could have exterminated all of the Jews, but I left some of them [alive] so that the world would know why I exterminated them.’”²

In the West, such statements would have been met with outrage, but not in Egypt, where positive references to Hitler and the destruction of the Jews have been an accepted part of public discourse for decades. In this respect, at least, the uprising of 2011 that deposed former President Husni Mubarak changed nothing.

Irrational ideologies are harder to defeat than illegitimate rulers. This is certainly true in the case of Egypt, where the ousted Mubarak was condemned as a friend of Israel and the protestors carried placards in which the president’s face was covered with Stars of David.³ The emergence of mass movements for change in the Arab world has not, therefore, removed the need to tackle Arab antisemitism; on the contrary, in a context of heightened political activism and major reorientations, that need has become more pressing than ever. It is, therefore, all the more regrettable that researchers into antisemitism are divided into separate camps. While all agree that in no other part of the world is antisemitism as widespread and commonplace as in the Middle East, the unanimity vanishes when it comes to explaining the causes and context of this antisemitism.

On the one hand there are those who claim that hostility to Jews in the Arab world has merely developed in direct response to Zionism and Israeli policies. On the other hand, some insist that Islamists and Nazis introduced and reinforced an antisemitic interpretation of the conflict. The former school emphasizes the differences between Arab antisemitism and its European forerunner, while the latter stresses their similarity. The former asserts that the only way to remove the antisemitism is to resolve the Middle East conflict, the latter that that conflict can only be resolved after the removal of the antisemitism. The disagreement is not about whether a connection between the Palestinian conflict and this antisemitism exists, but about the nature of that connection.

The purpose of this essay is to describe and comment on the key features of this controversy. However, the reader should be aware that the author is a participant, not a neutral observer, in this debate and this attempt to take stock is also a contribution to it.

The dominant paradigm

The conventional explanation for Arab antisemitism links it directly to the Middle East conflict. Prominent scholars such as Yehoshafat Harkabi and Bernard Lewis pioneered this still dominant position some decades ago. “Arab anti-Semitism“ wrote Harkabi in 1972, “is not the cause of the conflict but one of its results. ... If the Arab - Israel conflict was settled anti-Semitic manifestations would die out.”⁴ In 1985 Bernard Lewis wrote in the same vein, “For Christian anti-Semites, the Palestine problem is a pretext and an outlet for their hatred; for Muslim anti-Semites it is the cause.”⁵

While advancing this argument, Harkabi and Lewis did not try to downplay or excuse the antisemitism itself. On the contrary, according to Harkabi, it was particularly “vigorous and aggressive”, “fervent and vengeful”. Since it “regards the Jews as a pathological phenomenon, as a cancer in the flesh of humanity, it denies the Jews their right to a future and cherishes the ideal of a world without Jews.”⁶ Lewis too talked of a “Nazi-type anti-Semitism [that] came to dominate Arab discussions on Zionism and Judaism as well as of the state of Israel”.⁷

Today many antisemitism researchers and Islamic Studies and Middle East experts draw a different conclusion from the alleged link between this hostility to Jews and an actual conflict. They argue that, while the German form of Jew-hatred derived from irrational delusions, the Arab world is behaving less irrationally since its Jew-hatred is underpinned by a genuine conflict of interests. Let me illustrate the point with an example from the Berlin-based *Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung* (ZfA), the largest and most important European institution of its kind.

Berlin learning process

Around the turn of the millennium, the ZfA tried to organize a conference on the interface between antisemitism and Muslim anti-Zionism. However, the plan met with criticism from outside the institution. “Many of the invited Middle East specialists objected to the notion that anti-Semitism was the only form of racism in the Arab - Israel conflict, and the invitation was revised to mention anti-Arab racism as well”.⁸

Werner Bergmann, the deputy head of the ZfA, stated that his institution had undergone a “learning process” in the run-up to the conference, in which certain “experts on Islam and

the Middle East had played a central role". In the course of this process, it had been demonstrated that Arab - Islamic antisemitism could only be "fully" understood if, "rather than starting from antisemitism, one approached it as a consequence of the Palestine conflict." According to Bergmann, "all parties to the conflict should become objects of analysis. This means that, in mirror-image fashion, the negative perceptions of the Palestinian people ... by ... the Israeli side must also be taken into consideration".⁹

The keyword here is "mirror-image". While research into anti-Arab racism in Israel may well be a worthwhile undertaking, the "mirror-image" approach neglects the distinction between racism and antisemitism and wrongly assumes that Arab antisemitism "mirrors" Jewish behavior.

So the *first* result of this "learning process" was that the ZfA adopted an equidistant position. The planned conference on the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism turned into an international conference on the topic of "the origins of images of the enemy in the Palestine conflict."¹⁰ The "image of the Arab enemy" and the "image of the Jewish enemy" were assumed to be the same sort of thing, as if Israel "in mirror-image fashion" were advocating the destruction of specific Arab states, or major Israeli political parties had described the Arabs as a "cancer in the flesh of humanity" that had to be destroyed in the interests of humanity.

Secondly, the "learning process" entailed a new and partisan view of the Middle East conflict. For example in 2008 the ZfA published a work of reference entitled *Handbuch des Antisemitismus – Länder und Regionen*. In the entry for "Palestine", the volume summarizes the founding of the state of Israel in this way:

"The foundation of the State of Israel has entered Arab political discourse as the *nakba* ("catastrophe"). The flight and expulsion of 700,000 Palestinian Arabs, who left the land in the course of the fighting and the territorial loss of a large proportion of the former Mandate territory were perceived by the Arab side as the result of the ongoing intrigues of European powers. In the 1950s and 60s the Palestine question moved to the centre of the Pan-Arab ideology as a symbol of imperialist threats."¹¹

This standard work mentions neither the UN Partition Resolution of 1947 nor the military assault by several Arab states on the newly established Jewish state. Instead, the author presents this key moment in the Middle East conflict solely as "perceived by the Arab side", an approach which inevitably gives plausibility to the "image of the Jewish enemy".

Replacing facts with narratives in this way is intrinsically problematic. Still more serious, however, is the fact that alternative points of view are ignored; indeed, their very existence is not mentioned. In this instance, therefore, the attempt to compare the "images of the enemy" of antisemites and of Jews "mirror-image fashion" has led to a thoroughly biased and misleading account of the Middle East conflict.

Moreover, *thirdly*, this “learning process” has resulted in efforts to find mitigating circumstances for Arab antisemitism. Thus, the German researcher of Islam, Jochen Müller, insists that, unlike its European precursor, Arab antisemitism “is ‘at least’ based on a real problem, namely the marginalization of the Palestinians”. The same line has been taken by the ZfA’s Juliane Wetzel, who argues that, in the case of Arab antisemitism, “the motivation is clearly different from that of the [kind of] antisemitism [which] is not based on any kind of real conflict whatsoever.”¹² The implicit conclusion of all this is that, if one wants to combat Arab antisemitism, one must first get to grips with the “real conflict with the Jews”: to solve the Middle East conflict.

Just recently, there have been indications of a possible shift within the ZfA. In an essay in the institute’s 2009 *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung*, we read that “Israeli policy is *not* the decisive factor in the more recent evolution of Arab antisemitism. ... Not only the scale, but also the logic underlying current anti-Jewish propaganda *cannot* be fully explained by the Middle East conflict.”¹³ We shall have to wait to see whether there has indeed been a change of mind. There are, in any case, good reasons for such a change, as we will show in the next section.

New directions in research

The paradigm in which Arab antisemitism is only seen as the result of the Middle East conflict is facing a mounting challenge, for a number of reasons.

First, the real course of the Middle East conflict refutes the claim that Israeli policies are the cause and antisemitism the effect. If this were the real causal connection, the Israeli withdrawals from Lebanon (2000) and Gaza (2005) should have led to a decline in antisemitism. As we know, the opposite happened. The Israeli withdrawals reinforced rather than weakened the antisemitic uproar.

Second, researchers have uncovered new material that contradicts the link theory. As Hillel Cohen shows in his pioneering study, *Army of Shadows. Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917 - 1948*, only a minority of Palestinians reacted antisemitically to Zionism at that time. “Cooperation and collaboration were prevalent, in a variety of forms, throughout the period and among all classes and sectors. Collaboration was not only common but a central feature of Palestinian society and politics.”¹⁴ Clearly, therefore, antisemitism was not the inevitable response to the Middle East conflict, since other responses were more widespread than previously recognized.

Third, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the texts of Islamic antisemitism were subjected to closer scrutiny. Now for the first time the Charter of Hamas was put under the microscope and the similarity of its discourse with that of Nazi antisemitism recognized. Only

now did many scholars start to use The Middle East Media Research Institute's translations as sources. This has led to a decline in the willingness to find mitigating circumstances for Arab antisemitism and has given new urgency to the matter of its origins.

Fourth, and this is the decisive point, the opening - up of a new field of research has led to the appearance of a series of books that have begun to tackle the issue of the possible contributions of Nazism and Islamism to the rise of this antisemitism. Prior to September 11, the only book dealing with such matters was Robert Wistrich's *Hitler's Apocalypse. Jews and the Nazi Legacy*, published in 1985, in which he described the "ideological rapprochement between Islamic and National-Socialist antisemitism" and dealt with the "connection between the Nazis' 'Final Solution' and the later attempts to destroy the State of Israel".¹⁵ Since 2001, other scholars too have devoted their attention to these topics.¹⁶

The year 2002 saw the appearance of my book *Jihad and Jew-Hatred*, which summarizes the contents of the relevant secondary sources against the background of September 11 and shows how the Nazis succeeded in disseminating a firmly antisemitic interpretation of the Middle East conflict in the Arab world.

Since 2004, scholars have focused on Nazi radio propaganda - between 1939 and 1945 the Nazis broadcast daily radio programs from Berlin to the Islamic world in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hindi. Then American historian Jeffrey Herf made a sensational discovery: he found some several thousand pages of transcripts of these broadcasts. His 2009 study, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, mines this new material and shows how the Nazis endeavored to popularize the Jew-hatred found in early Islamic sources and radicalized it by combining it with the patterns of European antisemitism. He also shows how this antisemitism outlived the Shoah, for example in a letter sent to representatives of the Arab League in July 1946 by Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, in honor of Amin El-Husseini, the former Mufti of Jerusalem who subsequently became a friend of Heinrich Himmler. The letter stated, "The Mufti is Palestine and Palestine is the Mufti. ... Yes, this hero ... fought Zionism, with the help of Hitler and Germany. Germany and Hitler are gone, but Amin Al-Husseini will continue the struggle. ... Amin! March on! God is with you! We are behind you!"¹⁷ By this time, Hassan Al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood had become a leading political force. In 1946 it had more than 500,000 members and could mobilize a further 500,000 for its public rallies in Egypt alone.¹⁸

In 2006, in their book, *Nazi Palestine: The Plans for the Extermination of the Jews in Palestine*, historians Martin Cüppers and Klaus-Michael Mallmann provided the proof that the Nazis planned to do in the Middle East what they were already doing in Eastern Europe: wipe out the Jews with the help of the local non-Jewish population.

Both historians explicitly challenge the dominant idea that Palestinian antisemitism developed as a reaction to the policies of the Zionists, calling this assumption "a classic case of a reversal of cause and effect."¹⁹

This was followed by the pioneering study *From Empathy to Denial* by Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, which deals with the scale of Holocaust denial and Holocaust approval in the Arab world. They show that even “[Holocaust] justification was not confined to marginal or radical circles and media, but appeared among mainstream producers of culture, and did not arouse any significant criticism or condemnation in the Arab public discourse.”²⁰

The research efforts have yielded an impressive amount of new knowledge – knowledge apt to change our view of the history of the Middle East conflict.

First of all, it allows us to give a clearer answer to the question of the roots of Arab antisemitism. At the beginning of the 1930s there were still several competing approaches to the question of how to view and possibly solve the Palestine conflict – the antisemitic approach that the Mufti of Jerusalem was already following before 1933 was only one of them. Nazi propagandists intervened into this state of uncertainty from the outside. They used the Palestine conflict as a vehicle to disseminate their Jew-hatred as widely as possible, working in alliance with the nascent Islamist movement, which had designated Zionism as its mortal enemy for religious reasons. The suggestive mixture of National Socialist slogans, Koranic verses, and quotations from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that were conveyed to the illiterate masses by Nazi radio broadcasts from 1939 onwards began to exert its effect. A significant proportion of the Arab world gradually began to view the Middle East conflict through a lens with two superimposed distorting filters: that of early Islamic Jew-hatred and that of modern antisemitism. To paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre, it was no longer “experience that created the idea of the Jews”. Instead, “prejudice distorted the experience.”²¹

Secondly, the new research allows us to take a fresh look at the key turning point in the Middle East conflict: the events of 1947 and 1948. On 29 November 1947 the United Nations came out in support of a two-state solution for Palestine. In response, first Arab guerrilla forces and then the armies of Arab states went to war with the aim of preventing the implementation of the UN resolution. It was not the foundation of the Jewish state, as the ZfA’s handbook claims, but this war and the defeat of the Arab armies in 1949 that created the mass flight and exclusion of Arabs from Palestine, with all the well-known consequences.

However, if what Hillel Cohen concludes as a result of his research is true, that “there can be little doubt that the Mufti’s inflexible position and refusal to accept any partition proposal were the major reasons for the outbreak of war in 1948,”²² and if it is true that the majority of Palestinian Arabs abstained from the struggle, so that the Mufti had to rely on the notoriously antisemitic Muslim Brotherhood for his mass support, then our view of the Middle East conflict has to change. For it could then be taken as proven that the hatred of Jews - systematically disseminated by the Nazis between 1939 and 1945 and whipped up still further by Amin el-Husseini and the Muslim Brotherhood from 1946 to 1948 - was the main trigger for this defining moment in the Middle East conflict.

All the above information points to the following conclusions: Arab and Muslim antisemitism is no less dangerous than its European predecessor; Israeli policies are only responsible for this antisemitism in a very roundabout way, and to settle the Middle East conflict one must first of all counter this antisemitism.

Not surprisingly, the new publications triggered a major international debate with, at least in the United States, repercussions beyond the academy. In particular, Paul Berman's latest book, *The Flight of the Intellectuals*, sparked off a discussion about the link between Islamism and Nazism in the pages of influential journals and newspapers such as *Foreign Affairs* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

However, the response of much of the academic Islamic and Middle Eastern studies establishment to this new information has been, to say the least, disappointing. Rather than welcoming the new information and embarking on further research to supplement it, the response in the academic journals and congresses has been icy. Indeed, many of the scholars mentioned above have faced personal attacks of a kind rarely encountered in other academic fields.

What sort of arguments have the opponents of the new research put forward? I shall start with a particular category of objection: the accusation that all the above-mentioned authors are consciously or unconsciously engaging in pro-Israeli propaganda.

An "Anti-Arab Propaganda war"?

The clearest statement of this accusation has come from Gilbert Achcar, a Professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and author of *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, which has won the accolades of leading lights such as Francis R. Nicosia and Peter Novick and been hailed by many other writers as the best existing, if not the definitive, criticism of the new research.

Although Achcar repudiates Arab antisemitism, his criticism of it is motivated by anti-Zionism. In other words he criticizes antisemitism not because it envisages the murder of Jews and renders the Middle East conflict insoluble, but because "...these anti-Semitic ravings ... in fact help Israel produce anti-Arab propaganda". He describes the research institute MEMRI, which documents these "ravings" as "a function of the Arab - Israeli conflict, acting like a sub-department of the Israeli propaganda services" and Professor Wistrich, possibly the world's most renowned expert on antisemitism, as "another professional in the anti-Arab propaganda war."²³ Achcar does not criticize MEMRI or Wistrich for mistranslation or misinterpretation, but claims that Israel allegedly benefits from their work. Within this mind-set, the propaganda trap can only be avoided by excusing or ignoring Arab antisemitism.

René Wildangel, who worked for many years at the *Zentrum für Moderner Orient* (Centre of Modern Oriental Studies - ZMO) in Berlin, and serves today as an adviser to the Green Party group in the German parliament, is more restrained. He too, however, is convinced that the new research effort is intended to harm the Arab cause and that “concrete historical-political motives” lie behind the “marked emphasis on the Grand Mufti” and have the aim, “of discrediting Arab demands in the Middle East conflict.”²⁴ Wildangel seems to find the question of whether discussion of the Mufti serves to propagate myths or establish the real sequence of events of secondary interest.

Peter Wien, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Maryland, agrees with Wildangel. In his view, the connection between Nazi antisemitism and the Arab world has “been used to contest the legitimacy of 20th - century Arab political movements across the ideological spectrum.”²⁵ I do not believe this to be the case. Nonetheless, any product of research can, of course, be abused for political ends. This is not, however, a reason for halting research, but for protecting it against academic malpractice and the corrupting effects of political bias.

Wien, however, does not draw such a clear distinction between politics and scholarship. He believes that the question of the relationship between the Nazis and the Arab world, “has become paradigmatic in defining *scholarly and political* approaches to key areas of Middle Eastern history.”²⁶ Here politics and scholarship are mixed up in such a way as to imply that certain topics should be avoided for political reasons, such as the desirability of not looking too closely at the nature of certain Arab political movements.

Götz Nordbruch, Assistant Professor at the Centre for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Southern Denmark, seems to take a similar view. He, too, traces “the latest surge of scholarly interest in this facet of [the] twentieth century” back to political interests. In his view, “the quest for legitimacy of the respective sides in the Arab - Israeli conflict increasingly involves references to Nazi German history.” Does Nordbruch really believe that Herf, Meir and Litvak, Cüppers and Mallmann and others referred to in his review article wrote their works in order to promote specific Israeli or Palestinian political agendas? As evidence, he adduces the distribution by the Israeli foreign ministry in the summer of 2009 of a picture showing Amin el-Husseini with Adolf Hitler. This was done, he writes, in order “to discredit Israel’s Palestinians opponents in today’s conflict.”²⁷ But even if this were true, it remains unclear how the distribution of such a photo might bring serious research about the Mufti into disrepute.

The common denominator of all such statements lies in an imperative that recalls the politicized science of the former Soviet Union: keep away from research areas that might harm “the right side” and be of use to the “wrong side”. Jeffrey Herf personally experienced this mechanism at work at a conference held in May 2010 in Tel Aviv on Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism, 1939 - 1945: “I have presented abundant evidence of that collaboration

... I even heard one conference participant say that presenting such evidence, even if true, was politically damaging to the Arab and Palestinian cause and thus, presumably, should not be brought forth.”²⁸ So only facts supportive of the political goal can be accepted as historical truths.

The genocidal antisemitism of Hizbullah and Hamas, however, is a fact that no one can deny. So how do the opponents of the new research effort deal with this kind of antisemitism in the Arab world?

A Respectable Type of Antisemitism?

Let us start with Marc Lynch, a Professor of Political Science and International Affairs and Director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University. In a review of Paul Berman’s book, *The Flight of the Intellectuals for Foreign Affairs*, Lynch takes up the issue of an episode involving the preacher Yussuf al-Qaradawi, whose program on *Al-Jazeera* has made him one of the Muslim Brotherhood’s most influential ideologues and a leading authority within Sunni Islam.

In January 2009, Qaradawi explained the Holocaust as a just punishment by God. Berman quotes this in his book: “Throughout history, Allah has imposed upon them [Jews] people who would punish them for their corruption. The last punishment was carried out by Hitler. By means of all the things he did to them ... he managed to put them in their place.” In another television show, Qaradawi called for mass murder: “Oh Allah, take this oppressive, Jewish, Zionist band of people. Oh Allah, do not spare a single one of them. Oh Allah, count their numbers, and kill them, down to the very last one”. Berman quotes this too.²⁹

Lynch avoids mentioning this aggressive antisemitism in his review. Qaradawi is a moderate Muslim, he writes, adding: “At the same time, he ... is certainly hostile toward Israel”.³⁰ Here Lynch has managed to interpret Qaradawi’s approval of the Holocaust as an expression of a – perhaps in his eyes justified – hostility to Israel.

In the next edition of *Foreign Affairs*, Berman criticized these apologetics. He writes that Lynch “hides behind euphemisms – in this case, his phrase ‘hostile toward Israel,’ when what he really means is ‘Hitlerian’.” However, Lynch was not to be deterred, replying that, in the above-mentioned remarks, “Indeed, Qaradawi has voiced extremely hostile views of Israel”.³¹

The defensive reaction displayed here by an American Middle Eastern expert writing in the leading foreign policy publication of the United States speaks volumes. Lynch feigns blindness and twists Qaradawi’s unmistakably antisemitic statements to fit his own political concern – the wish to work with the “moderate Islamist” Qaradawi. At the same time he exposes an “orientalist” approach with his attempt to explain Qaradawi’s statement

condescendingly. If a Christian leader of the Ku Klux Klan had said what Qaradawi proclaimed to his millions of listeners, Lynch would presumably have taken his words seriously and criticized it as “Hitlerian” antisemitism. The words of a Muslim, on the other hand, seem to carry less weight for Lynch, who denies the Muslim Brotherhood preacher the ability to mean what he says. In so doing, he allows himself to do something he would never do if he were dealing with a Western religious figure: translate a eulogy to Hitler into an expression of “hostility to Israel”. In order to sustain this policy of denial, it is no surprise to find Lynch denouncing Berman’s thoughts about the possible repercussions of Nazi propaganda as “ludicrous efforts ... [a] construct ... [and a] cartoonish tale”.³²

Gilbert Achcar, to whom Lynch refers approvingly in *Foreign Affairs*, takes a different tack. He does not deny the existence of the ugly expressions of Arab antisemitism; instead, he makes Israel responsible for them. He sees in Arab antisemitism only “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.”³³

Achcar, therefore, wants to distinguish between a pathological European antisemitism and the frustration-based “expressions” of the Arabs. However, were he to examine the “expressions” more closely, he would soon see that they are violent fantasies directed at the destruction of the Jews or Israel. Such fantasies have nothing to do with real conflicts. Otherwise the response would not be antisemitism, but a justified or unjustified fury over a misguided policy, aimed at changing behavior, not annihilation.

Achcar even manages to find excuses for the dissemination of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He claims to be able to discern a “qualitative difference” between an “antisemitic and an anti-Zionist reading” of the *Protocols* and deems it “necessary” to distinguish between an unforgivable and forgivable distribution of them.³⁴

It is, of course, true that the context of Arab antisemitism is very different from the context of Nazi antisemitism. 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 that Lynch and Achcar do not wish to see. In this avoidance they are joined by the other critics of the new research such as Nordbruch in *Middle East Studies* or Peter Wien and Joel Beinin in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.³⁵ It is this pre-emptive denial, or more precisely aversion of the gaze, that unites this group. This attitude is extended even to the treatment of the extreme form of antisemitism – Holocaust denial.

Holocaust denial as the “anti-Zionism of fools”

To claim that Auschwitz is a myth is to designate the Jews as a universal enemy, that has for seventy years been deceiving humanity in pursuit of filthy lucre. Holocaust denial takes antisemitism to new heights and incites the same genocidal hatred that paved the way for the Shoah. One would, therefore, prefer not to believe that some in Western academia have found ways of justifying even this.

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.”³⁶

His concern is not with the issue itself, but with promoting the notion that Israel is responsible not only for antisemitism, but also for 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 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 ... comes from rage and frustration over the escalation of Israeli violence, along with increased use of the Holocaust. It began with the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.”³⁷

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.³⁸ This hardly amounts to an Israeli “propaganda offensive”.

Still more ridiculous is Achcar’s claim that Arab Holocaust denial started in 1982. The documents presented by Herf 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.”³⁹

In May 1945, a Jerusalem-based newspaper, *Filastin*, took up the theme: “The Jews have grossly overstated the number of their victims in Europe. ... Their propaganda and their ,haggling’ over ,these victims’ was a means to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.” 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“.⁴⁰ 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 reaction of an oppressed group to the onslaught of an all-powerful Israel

“Are all forms of Holocaust denial the same? Should such denial, when it 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?”⁴¹ Arab Holocaust denial, he continues, “is not primarily an expression of antisemitism, as western Holocaust denial certainly is, but an expression of what I call the ‘anti-Zionism of the fools’.”⁴²

The latter phrase recalls the dictum of the German socialist leader August Bebel, who, in 1893, described antisemitism as the “socialism of fools” – a mistake that was perhaps understandable fifty years before the Holocaust, but not seventy years after it! For, with this argument, Achcar gives the Holocaust deniers, as long as they belong to what he considers an “oppressed group”, a moral *carte blanche*: what would otherwise be outrageous become acceptable. He also brands the Arabs as stupid people who do not 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.”⁴³

As with Lynch, there is something contemptuous about this. When it comes to Arab antisemites, Achcar permits himself to do what he would never do to a French counterpart: refuse to treat them as human beings responsible for their own words and deeds.

While showing no interest in the concrete expressions of Arab Holocaust denial, he at the same time provides them with a protective cover; in so doing he offers a striking example of the connection between poor scholarship and moral failure. As the great historian of the Middle East, Elie Kedourie, once remarked, “Moral integrity and scholarly rigor were always complementary”.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, Achcar’s book was very well received among German Middle East scholars. Alexander Flores, an Islamic Studies expert at the University of Bremen, gushed with praise for Achcar’s “great book”.⁴⁵ The Berlin-based ZMO talked of a “pioneering book” and in May 2010 invited the author to a government-sponsored reading. This is an “objective and solid study of major significance”, asserted Ulrike Freitag, the ZMO’s director. “What today moves many people to doubt the Holocaust or the number of victims is related to Israel’s instrumentalization of the latter in the Middle East conflict.”⁴⁶ She fails to explain, however, what she means by Israel’s “instrumentalization” of the Holocaust.

A certain understanding for the Arab Holocaust deniers was also displayed by Sonja Hegasy, Deputy Director of the ZMO, when she stated that, “Holocaust denial is also a response to the so-called Holocaust industry.”⁴⁷

A still more explicit position was adopted by long-standing ZMO employee René Wildangel in his doctoral thesis: “The more strongly the Holocaust was used to legitimate the Israeli state, the more impossible did it become to accept it [the Holocaust] from the Arab point of view.”⁴⁸ Let us linger awhile over this remark, behind which lurks a two-fold emotional admission. Firstly it expresses the author’s extreme hostility to Israel. If we pursue his line of thought, it would also be “impossible” from “the Arab point of view” to admit the existence of the Second Jewish Temple, since the ancient history of Palestine also belongs to the “legitimizing basis” for the existence of Israel. Fact turns into fiction and fiction into fact, according to the needs of the anti-Israeli cause.

Secondly, Wildangel takes up the cudgels for the Arab Holocaust deniers using arguments that, like Achcar’s, treat Arabs as if they are unable to take responsibility for their own decisions. They are treated here like puppets that, in the Israeli grip, can only move and think reflexively, making it somehow “impossible” for them to accept the historical fact of the Holocaust. However, the Arab Spring of 2011 has refuted this racist assumption, showing the Arab peoples not to be puppets at all.

Imbada and the Arab Spring

Nobody knows what the future holds for the rebellion-wracked countries of the Arab world. On the one hand, there is the 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. “The antisemite is a person who is afraid”, wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. “Afraid of his free will, his instincts, his responsibility – of any change, of the world.”⁴⁹ The insurgent forces have, at least temporarily, shaken off this fear and opened up a new space for reflection.

On the other hand, powerful actors such as the Iranian regime, Hizbullah, Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are eyeing their chance. “The Arab revolutions ... are the realization of the Koranic verses [which say] that the Arabs will gather together and fight the Jews,” writes Egyptian journalist Safaa Saleh in the article quoted in my introduction.⁵⁰

It is precisely at such a time – a time of new beginnings – that it becomes more important than ever to publicly raise the issues of the roots and potential consequences of antisemitism in the Middle East. Many things are happening that inspire curiosity and call for a proper explanation.

Why, for example, in May 2011, did Safaa Salah, of her own free will, decide to praise the Holocaust and Hitler? Why did the Egyptian government newspaper *Al-Gumhurriya*, choose to publish her commentary? And why did its publication fail to meet with any visible criticism?

The opponents of the new research effort continue to stifle that curiosity and discredit the search for explanations. To this end they hurl political buzzwords like hand grenades: “Israeli propaganda war!” “Instrumentalization of the Holocaust!” “Anti-Arab propaganda!” While these slogans have no explanatory value, they seem to achieve their goal: they help a particular group of academics rationalize their own intellectual self-deception, while at the same time marking out the boundaries beyond which researchers should not stray, lest they be denounced as “Israeli propagandists”. It is all about protecting a particular worldview against the impact of reality. Jeffrey Herf has defined this worldview in terms of “third worldism”, “anti-imperialism”, “post-colonialism”, “subaltern studies” and “anti-Zionism”.⁵¹

The adherents of this approach include groups of people who, at least in Germany, set the tone in important academic centers, such as the ZMO or ZfA. One might think that such centers, by their very nature, would be inclined to support research into the relationship between National Socialism and Islamism in the Middle East. In fact, they refuse to engage in such research, possibly in order to sustain their one-sided view of the Middle East conflict.

The controversy over the roots of antisemitism in the Middle East is, however, more than just an academic discussion. Our field of research has this much in common with earthquake studies: we strive to minimize the devastation that can be caused by the object of our research. In the Middle East, the danger of catastrophe is especially great. Here, positive references to Hitler are still tolerated. Here, the longing to destroy Israel is rarely questioned and even more rarely opposed.

Irrational ideologies are harder to defeat than illegitimate rulers. Until scholarship ceases to misinterpret this Jew-hatred as the product of Jewish behavior, there is little likelihood of a start being made on the long process of the liberation of the Arab peoples from antisemitism.

Translated from the German by Colin Meade.

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and find the book's table of content and an address to order it at

http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/product_info.php?products_id=806792 .

¹ This article is a chapter of the book „Resurgent Antisemitism: Global Perspectives,” edited by Alvin H. Rosenfeld and published by Indiana University Press in 2013; 576-pages, \$ 35.00. See:
http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/product_info.php?products_id=806792 .

² Article in the Egyptian government daily *Al-Gumhouryya*: The Jews Are behind the Clashes between Egypt’s Muslims and Copts, MEMRI, Special Dispatch Series, No. 3844, (May 17, 2011).

³ John Rosenthal, “Democracy or Jew-Hatred? More evidence of Antisemitism at the Egypt Protests,”
<http://pajamasmedia.com/blog/democracy-or-jew-hatred-more-evidence-of-anti-semitism-at-the-egypt-protests/> .

⁴ Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes to Israel*, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), p. 298.

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, London:(Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 259.

⁶ Harkabi, pp. 299-302.

⁷ Lewis, p. 240.

⁸ Joel Beinin , review of Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda in the Arab World* and Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 42, no. 4.

⁹ Werner Bergmann, Zur Entstehung von Feindbildern im Konflikt um Palästina, in Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 12, (Berlin: Metropol, 2003), pp. 16-17. Bergmann refers to the following people as inspirations behind this learning process: Helga Baumgarten (Bierzeit University), Gudrun Krämer (Freie Universität Berlin), Gerhard Höpp (Zentrum Moderner Orient), John Bunzl (Universität Wien), Kai Hafez (Deutsches Orient Institut Hamburg) and Joel Beinin (Stanford University).

¹⁰ Press release issued by the Technischen Universität Berlin “Die Entstehung von Feindbildern im Konflikt um Palästina,” (August 31, 2000), at: <http://idw-online.de/pages/de/news?print=1&id=23924> .

¹¹ Götz Nordbruch, Palästina, in: Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Band 1: Länder und Regionen*, (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2008), p. 261. The relevant passage has been quoted in full.

¹² Jochen Müller, „Wessen Geistes Kind? Arabischer Nationalismus, Islamismus und Antisemitismus im Mittleren Osten,“ *Kommune*, issue 2/3, (2003); Juliane Wetzel, „Judenfeindschaft unter Muslimen in Europa,“ in: Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Islamfeindschaft und ihr Kontext*, (Berlin: Metropol, 2009), p. 52.

¹³ Malte Gebert and Carmen Matussek, “‘Selbst wenn sie unser Land verlassen würden...’ Die Adaption der Protokolle der Weisen von Zion in der arabischen Welt,“ in: Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 18, (Berlin: Metropol, 2009), p. 68. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁴ Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 259.

¹⁵ Robert Wistrich, *Der antisemitische Wahn*, (Munich: Max Huber, 1987), p. 313, 304.

¹⁶ **2001** saw the publication in Berlin of *Mufti-Papiere. Briefe, Memoranden, Reden und Aufrufe Amin al-Husainis aus dem Exil, 1940-1945*, edited by Gerhard Höpp (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag). In **2002** Ca Ira (Freiburg) published my *Djihad und Judenhass. Über den neuen antijüdischen Krieg*. In **2004** *Blind für die Geschichte? Arabische Begegnungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus*, edited by Gerhard Höpp, Peter Wien and René Wildangel was published in Berlin (Klaus Schwarz Verlag) and *Germans and the Middle East*, ed. by Wolfgang G. Schwanitz was published in Madrid (Ibero-americana). **2006** saw the publication of Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers’s *Halbmond und Hakenkreuz. Das Dritte Reich, die*

Araber und Palästina (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), Peter Wien's *Iraq Arab Nationalism. Authoritarian, Totalitarian and Pro-Fascist Inclinations 1932-1941* (London: Routledge) and Jeffrey Herf's study *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust*, which also refers to developments in the Middle East. **2007** saw the publication of an English version of Jennie Lebl's study, originally written in Serbo-Croat, *The Mufti of Jerusalem Haj-Amin el-Husseini and National-Socialism* in Belgrade (Cigoja-Verlag); René Wildangel's *Zwischen Achse und Mandatsmacht. Palästina und der Nationalsozialismus* (Klaus Schwarz Verlag) in Berlin; a new edition of Klaus Gensicke's 1988 book, *Der Mufti von Jerusalem und die Nationalsozialisten* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), and the English version of Jihad und Judenhass: *Jihad and Jew-Hatred. Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11* (Telos Press) in New York. In **2008** *Icon of Evil. Hitler's Mufti and the Rise of Radical Islam* by David G. Dalin/John F. Rothmann was published in New York (Random House). **2009** saw the publication in London of Meir Litvak and Esther Webman's study, *From Empathy to Denial. Arab Responses to the Holocaust* (Hurst & Company) and Götz Nordbruch's *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon. The ambivalence of the German option 1933-1945* (Routledge); in New Haven of Jeffrey Herf's *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (Yale University Press); and in New York of Gilbert Achcar's *The Arabs and the Holocaust* (Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company). In **2010** Mallmann and Cüppers' *Nazi Palestine: The Plans For the Extermination of the Jews in Palestin* (*Enigma Books*) and Paul Berman's *The Flight of the Intellectuals* (Mellville House) were published in New York.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab world*, pp. 243-4.

¹⁸ Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 328.

¹⁹ Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers, *Halbmond und Hakenkreuz*, p. 256.

²⁰ Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial*, p. 195.

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, Betrachtungen zur Judenfrage, in: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Drei Essays*, (West-Berlin: Ullstein, 1970), p. 111.

²² Cohen, *Army of Shadows*, p. 10.

²³ Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, pp. 182 and 213.

²⁴ René Wildangel, „Auf der Suche nach dem Skandal. Eine Reaktion auf den Themenschwerpunkt ‚Nazikollaborateure in der Dritten Welt‘, in: Informationszentrum 3. Welt (iz3W) no. 313, July/August 2009.

²⁵ Peter Wien, „Coming to Terms with the Past: German Academia and Historical Relations Between the Arab Lands and Nazi Germany,“ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 2 (2010) p. 311.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, author's emphasis.

²⁷ Götz Nordbruch, „Cultural Fusion' of Thought and Ambitions? Memory, Politics and the History of Arab-Nazi German Encounters“ *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no.1 (January 2011), p. 183.

²⁸ „Das Bild der Dritten Welt wird sich verändern“, Karl Pfeifer im Gespräch mit Jeffrey Herf,“ in: *Jungle World* (July 15, 2010).

²⁹ Paul Berman, *The flight of the Intellectuals*, p. 78 and 92.

³⁰ Marc Lynch, „Veiled Truths: The Rise of Political Islam and the West“, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2010,

³¹ Paul Berman, „Islamism, Unveiled. From Berlin to Cairo and Back Again“ and Marc Lynch, „Lynch Replies,“ in: *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2010.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, p. 256.

³⁴ Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, p. 208.

³⁵ Götz Nordbruch 2011, Peter Wien 2010, Joel Beinin 2010.

³⁶ Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, p. 181.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 256. See also the interview "Gilbert Achcar, Arab attitudes to the Holocaust", www.SocialistWorker.org, May 20, 2010.

³⁸ Peter Novick, *Nach dem Holocaust*, (Munich; Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), p. 215.

³⁹ Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, p. 177.

⁴⁰ Litvak and Webman, *From Empathy to Denial*, p. 52.

⁴¹ Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, p. 276.

⁴² Gilbert Achcar, "Arabs have a complex relationship with the Holocaust," *The Guardian*, (May 10, 2010).

⁴³ „Israel's Propaganda War: Blame the Grand Mufti. Gilbert Achcar Interviewed by George Miller," on: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/achcar120510p.html> .

⁴⁴ Alain Silvera, "Elie Kedourie, politique et moraliste," in Sylvia Kedourie, ed., *Elie Kedourie CBE., FBA 1926-1992: History, Philosophy, Politics*, (London: Frank Cass, 1998), p. 101.

⁴⁵ Alexander Flores, „Die Araber, der Holocaust und die universalistische Moral," *inamo* 16, no. 62, (Summer 2010).

⁴⁶ Samir Grees, „Krieg der Narrative," www.Qantara.de , (July 5, 2010).

⁴⁷ Sonja Hegasy, „Araber und Nazi-Deutschland. Kollaborateure und Widersacher," *Qantara.de*, (December 1, 2010). Hegasy here makes distorted use of Litvak and Webman's *From Empathy to Denial*.

⁴⁸ Wildangel, *Zwischen Achse und Mandatsmacht*, p. 403.

⁴⁹ Sartre, *Betrachtungen zur Judenfrage*, p. 134

⁵⁰ MEMRI (May 17, 2011).

⁵¹ „Das Bild der Dritten Welt."