

# How to challenge Islamic Antisemitism?

Islamic antisemitism is a major foreign policy issue: Only governments can stop the flow of hate messages by denouncing and punishing state- and non-state actors.<sup>1</sup>

**By Matthias Küntzel**

Islamic anti-Semitism, though it is not limited to the Islamist movements, is a key factor in the Islamists' war against the modern world. It triggers Tehran's desire to destroy the "cancerous tumor" of Israel and motivated the most recent Iranian attack on Israel by an armed drone. It inspires Recep Tayyip Erdogan's threat that Israelis won't be able "to find a tree to hide behind", a clear allusion to a *hadith* that demands the killing of Jews.<sup>2</sup> It causes Mahmoud Abbas to deny any connection between Jerusalem and the Jews<sup>3</sup> and transforms the political conflict between Israel and the Arabs into a religious struggle between right and wrong.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas in this text were first presented on February 19, 2018 at the Vienna conference "An End to Antisemitism!", organized by the European Jewish Congress together with New York University, Tel Aviv University and the University of Vienna from 18th to 22nd February 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Gruber, 'Erdogans Erlösungsantisemitismus: „Kein Baum wird die Juden schützen“, *MENA-WATCH*, December 15, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> In December 2017, Mahmoud Abbas claimed at a conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation: "Jerusalem is a Palestinian Arab Muslim Christian city, the eternal capital of the state of Palestine." See: Israel's violations absolve us from our commitments, *Wafa-News-Agency*, Dec. 13, 2017.

In this paper, I would like to discuss four topics. 1. What distinguishes Islamic antisemitism from other forms of Jew-hatred? 2. Why is it so difficult to fight Islamic antisemitism? 3. How can we challenge Islamic antisemitism? 4. Why is it especially important to challenge it?

### **1. What does the term “Islamic antisemitism” mean?**

This term is not intended as a general attack on Islam (whose texts also include Jew-friendly passages) nor a general attack on Muslims (quite a few of whom are against antisemitism).

Instead, it is about a specific expression of antisemitism based on two sources: The anti-Judaism of early Islam and the conspiratorial antisemitism of Europe. As a rule, the Islamic anti-Judaism of the old days was not determined by fear of Jewish conspiracy and domination, but rather by condescension: Jews were perceived to stand below the Muslims and had to accept their lower rank as dhimmis. Within Christianity, the image of the Jews was different: Here, they were feared as a dark and overpowering force, accused of spreading the plague in the Middle Ages and of masterminding casino capitalism in modern times. The essence of Islamic antisemitism is the fusion of Islamic anti-Judaism from the old scriptures with modern European antisemitism.

My first case in point is the Charter of Hamas. In Article 7, this Charter cites a *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad says that the Muslims will kill the Jews "until the Jew hides behind stone and tree, and then stone and tree say: O Muslim, O servant of God! There's a Jew behind me. Come and kill him." In contrast, Article 22 of the same Charter states that the Jews "were behind the First World War ... and behind the Second World War" and "encouraged the formation of the ... United Nations to rule the world." This text portrays the Jews on the one hand as degraded, fleeing and hiding behind trees and stones,

and simultaneously as the secret and true rulers of the world. It combines the worst old Islamic and the worst modern Christian images of the Jews. Through this mixture, both components become radicalized: European antisemitism is recharged by the religious and fanatical moment of radical Islam, while the old anti-Judaism of the Koran - supplemented by the world conspiracy theory - receives a new and eliminatory quality.

My second case in point is the widespread belief that Jews everywhere, in league with Israel, are behind a sinister plot to undermine and eradicate Islam. Let me quote Sayyid Qutb's famous pamphlet "Our Struggle With the Jews": The "bitter war which the Jews launched against Islam ... has not been extinguished, even for one moment, for close on fourteen centuries until this moment, its blaze raging in all corners of the earth."<sup>4</sup>

The seventh century is here again associated with the twentieth century and Koranic statements about Jews mixed with the phantasm of a worldwide conspiracy. This is a view of Muslims and Jews locked in a timeless and total confrontation until one completely subjugates the other.

Islamic antisemitism is not simply a continuation of tradition or a response to injustice; in fact it is the product of a process of deliberate fusion of old Islamic scriptures and new conspiracy theories which started 80 years ago.

Surprisingly, Nazi Germany's Arabic-speaking propaganda played an important role. This fact is little known, but has been confirmed by recent seminal studies such as Jeffrey Herf's "Nazi Propaganda in the Arab World" of 2009 and David Motadel's "Islam and Nazi Germany's War" of 2014.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Nettler, *Past Trials and Present Tribulations. A Muslim Fundamentalist's View of the Jews* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987, pp. 83-4.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda in the Arab World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

Since 1937, the Nazis sought to radicalize the latent anti-Judaism of Muslims in order to destroy the British plan for a two-state solution for Palestine – the so-called Peel Plan, which provided for the creation of a small Jewish state.

However, initial Nazi attempts to export their racist antisemitism into the Islamic world failed. As a consequence, the Nazis discovered the Islamic creed as a door opener to gain access to the Muslim masses. To quote David Motadel:

“Berlin made explicit use of religious rhetoric, terminology, and imagery and sought to engage with and reinterpret religious doctrine and concepts. ... Sacred texts such as the Qur’an ... were politicized to incite religious violence against alleged common enemies. ... German propaganda combined Islam with anti-Jewish agitation to an extent that had not hitherto been known in the modern Muslim world.”<sup>6</sup>

There is indeed a great antisemitic potential in Islamic scriptures if you read them selectively. Nazi Germany exploited the Arabs’ rejection of Zionism and used this antisemitic potential in pamphlets and radio programs in the Arabic language that were broadcast three times a day and seven times a week between April 1939 and April 1945. This ongoing propaganda strengthened an exclusively anti-Jewish reading of the Islamic scriptures, popularized European conspiracy theories and agitated in an antisemitic manner against the Zionist project.

These efforts, heavily supported by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, and his entourage, gradually changed the perception of Jews within Islamic societies. They contributed to the fact that Jews were more and more seen as a kind of “race” and that hostility to Jews became far more intense than in past eras of Islamic history.

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<sup>6</sup> Motadel, *op. cit.*, pp. 76 and 97.

The 31-page pamphlet "Islam – Judaism: Call by Grand Mufti to the Islamic World" of 1937 was the first important document of Islamic antisemitism. During the Second World War, the Nazis distributed this text in several languages within the Arab-Islamic world. This was followed in the early 1950s by Sayyid Qutb's "Our Struggle with the Jews" - a deeply religious pamphlet denouncing the temptations of modernity which Saudi Arabia disseminated in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. Then, in 1988, came the Charter of Hamas. One might think that an ideology that developed only 80 years ago would be easy to defeat. But this is not the case.

## **2. Why is it so difficult to fight this particular form of antisemitism?**

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

Let me start with the demonizers: The successes of Donald Trump, Marine le Pen, Geert Wilders and Germany's AfD have shown that racism against Muslims has become a mass phenomenon. These movements mix up Islamism and Islam in a populist way and use it to place every dark-skinned Muslim under general suspicion. We shouldn't make the mistake and expect these movements to help in the fight against Islamic Jew-hatred. They create, on the contrary, detrimental effects because, first of all, they lead this alleged fight under a racist banner and tend to label all Muslims as potential or real antisemites. They thus endorse "the Islamist claim that Islamists alone are true

Muslims, while waving away the modernizers [among them] as outliers, fabulists, and frauds,” to quote Daniel Pipes.<sup>7</sup>

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

We criticize so-called anti-racists who turn a blind eye to antisemitism among Muslims. It would be just as wrong if we, as opponents of antisemitism, tolerated or even accepted racism.

The emergence of these racist movements is linked to the downplaying of Islamism and Islamic antisemitism by the political and media elite in the West. This leads us to the second stupid approach to Islamic antisemitism – to treat it with “ignorance, avoidance, minimization, denial or misinterpretation.”<sup>8</sup> Neil J. Kressel wrote a whole book about this “conspiracy of silence”. Few would openly say that they are willing to tolerate or ignore Jew-hatred among Muslims. Instead, as an excuse they claim “that whatever happens now in the Muslim and Arab world by definition bears no resemblance to the ... history of Jew-hatred in the Christian world.”<sup>9</sup>

A case in point is Gilbert Achcar, a professor at the London School of Oriental and African Studies. Achcar does not deny that “antisemitism ... has grown spectacularly in Arab political statements and Arab media.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, he then goes on to excuse it by asking rhetorically: “Is the fantasy-based hatred of the Jews

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Pipes, ‘Foreword’, in: Christine Douglass-Williams, *The Challenge of Modernizing Islam* (New York: Encounter Books, 2017), p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Neil J. Kressel, ‘The Sons Of Pigs and Apes’. *Muslim Antisemitism and the Conspiracy of Silence*, Dulles/VA (Potomac Books) 2012, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Kressel, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, New York (Metropolitan Books) 2009, p. 248.

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>11</sup>

His answer is a definite no. “The antisemitic statements now heard in Arab countries”, he maintains, “are fantasy-laden expressions – due, as a rule to cultural backwardness – of an intense national frustration and oppression for which ‘the Jews’ of Palestine in their majority, as well as Israel, the ‘Jewish state’ they founded, must, in fact, be held responsible.”<sup>12</sup>

This statement presents a two-pronged apology for Islamic antisemitism. The first is the idea that such antisemitism is the antisemitism of the oppressed and that, since Israel is responsible for the oppression, it is responsible for this antisemitism as well. This assumption is highly problematic since those “fantasy-laden” expressions are directed at the destruction of the Jews or Israel. They, as a rule, do not address real deeds or misdeeds of Israel’s governments. Otherwise, the response would not be antisemitism aimed at annihilation, but justified or unjustified indignation over a misguided policy aimed at changing it.

Achcar’s second excuse is that Arab antisemitism is “due ... to cultural backwardness.” This is, firstly, factually wrong: the message of hate is spread by members of the cultural elite such as academics, journalists, publishers and clerics. It has, secondly, a racist undertone. Achcar claims that, when Arabs deny the Holocaust, “it has nothing to do with any conviction. It’s just a way of people venting their anger, venting their frustration, in the only means that they feel is available to them.”<sup>13</sup> Achcar thus gives the antisemites, as long as they belong to what he considers an oppressed group, a moral *carte blanche*.

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<sup>11</sup> Achcar, op. cit., p. 275.

<sup>12</sup> Achcar, op. cit., p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Israel’s Propaganda War: Blame the Grand Mufti’. Gilbert Achcar Interviewed by George Miller: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/achcar120510p.html>.

Achcar, like many of his colleagues, infantilizes Muslims by branding them as essentially stupid people who cannot be held to Western standards of decency and who cannot be expected to know what they are doing. Maajid Nawaz, a prominent British Muslim, derides this undertone: “A *credible* Muslim can only be inarticulate” and “requires an intermediary to ‘explain’ his anger.”<sup>14</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>14</sup> Maajid Nawaz, “The British Left’s Hypocritical Embrace of Islamism,” *Daily Beast*, 8 August, 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/08/the-british-left-s-hypocritical-embrace-of-islamism.html>.

It is true that racism is a component of antisemitism. Antisemitism, however, is not a component of racism, but a specific ideology with elements not known in the field of racism. This peculiarity is ignored in the listing of "antisemitism" and "Islamophobia". It was, by the way, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who more than anyone else made sure that the term "antisemitism" was always followed by the term "Islamophobia" in declarations by the Council of Europe or the OSCE.

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

### **3. What needs to be done to break out of this vicious circle?**

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

Today, Muslims who seek good relations with Jews are often treated as lepers. This has to end. It is therefore the first and most important step “to make the world safe for Muslim critics of antisemitism – physically safe, socially safe, organizationally safe, even academically safe.”<sup>15</sup> These critics must not exclude the Qur’an. The Tunisian philosopher Mezri Haddad, for example, refuses to

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<sup>15</sup> Kressel, op. cit., p. 201.

gloss over what the Qur'an says. Since "Islamic thinkers ... cannot purge the Qur'an of its potentially antisemitic dross" wrote Haddad, "they must closely examine this corpus with hermeneutical reason" and have to "show intellectual audacity."<sup>16</sup>

The time is ripe for this kind of endeavor. The intellectual climate within the Arab world has partly changed. More and more people have recognized that the dangers that threaten this region do not come from Israel, but from Sunni jihadists and Iran's theocracy. This experience seems today to be triggering a period of thaw in parts of the Arab world, and notably Saudi Arabia, not only with respect to Israel and the Jews, but also with regard to the debate about political and religious affairs. This dynamic contradicts both the malignant and the benevolent racists who try to construct a kind of *homo islamicus* to keep Muslims trapped in the cage of an immutable culture. It creates at the same time an opportunity to promote an alliance between Islamic and non-Islamic critics of Islamic antisemitism.

My second suggestion relates to the state level. Whether we are successful or unsuccessful in our fight against Islamic antisemitism depends crucially on the actions of governments. In Germany, for example, we have various attempts to contain Islamic antisemitism with a mixture of pedagogy and state prohibitions. These attempts are honorable, but they remain pointless as long as this antisemitism is not contained at its source – that is in Tehran, Beirut, Gaza or Ankara. They remain pointless as long as Jew-hatred incessantly manipulates the Muslims in Germany via social networks in the Turkish, Arabic or Persian languages. This proves: Islamic antisemitism is a major foreign policy issue. Only governments can stop this flow of hate messages by denouncing and punishing state or non-state actors that allow Islamic antisemitism to spread in

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<sup>16</sup> Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Special Dispatch Series No. 1362, November 21, 2006.

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

#### **4. Why is it especially important to challenge Islamic antisemitism?**

Today, we are witnessing an antisemitic war, led by Islamists. The intention to kill *any* Jew expresses the essence of antisemitic warfare. While conventional war – such as the ongoing war in the Ukraine or the many wars in Syria - is aimed at gaining territory and influence, the antisemitic war is aimed at extermination. Take as an example the jihad warriors of the Islamic State: In Europe they especially target Jewish institutions such as the Jewish school in Toulouse, the kosher market in Paris, the Jewish museum in Brussels or the synagogue in Copenhagen. They want to kill Jews. It does not matter if those Jews are Zionists or anti-Zionists, if they are supporters or opponents of Israeli policies. The only thing that matters is that Jews are killed.

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

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

Whoever threatens a nuclear power with destruction is provoking a nuclear exchange, a nuclear disaster.

Israel is certainly a nuclear power and Iran has the ability to construct a nuclear weapon as well. Amazingly, there was no outcry when Teheran proclaimed: "Israel must be wiped off the earth!" This battle cry, however, confronts us with a new kind of total war: the antisemitic nuclear war. Thus, challenging Islamic antisemitism effectively is not only about protecting the Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East. It is crucial to peace in the world.

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