

Matthias Küntzel, *Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11* (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2007)

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Several recent studies have focused on the echoes of Nazism in the Arab world. Among these, Küntzel's book has received much attention; yet, despite its valuable insights into the characteristics of modern antisemitic ideology, its conclusions are simplifying the complexity and ambivalences of contemporary nationalist and Islamist thought.

"In Islamist eyes, not only is everything Jewish evil, all evil is Jewish," (5) writes Matthias Küntzel in the introduction to his widely acclaimed study *"Jihad and Jew-Hatred. Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11."* The study is an attempt to trace the development of anti-Jewish agitation in the history of modern Islamist movements and to identify its significance within Islamist thought. Küntzel's major conclusions are summarized in a brief passage of his work:

In the 1930s [Nazism] threw its weight behind the Islamists and thus contributed to the fact that it was not the reform course embarked on by Bourguiba [in Tunisia] or Atatürk [in Turkey], but the identity-molding message that 'the Jew is our misfortune' which got the upper hand... Islamism remains marked by this connection [to Nazism] to this day. (101)

In his historical reconstruction of Islamist thought, Küntzel draws a direct line from the early Muslim Brotherhood via Palestinian Hamas to today's al-Qaida networks. These movements, he argues, share a "reactionary and antisemitic approach" to the existing injustices of this world. This view "identifies particular manifestations of capitalism, notably the principle of individualism and commerce, with 'the Jews' in the broadest sense and wants to 'liberate' itself through their destruction." (5) Instead of seeking a response to the ambivalences of modern societies based on reason and emancipatory principles, Islamists aim at "liberation" from what they consider a personification of evil: the Jews.

It is in this context that Küntzel's rather brief study opens an important perspective that has long been neglected. Küntzel convincingly argues that the origins of hostilities towards Jews must not be reduced to existing conflicts with Jews; instead this enmity should be understood as a reflection of distorted interpretations of the existing challenges faced in today's world. In short, it is not the conflict between Arabs and Israelis that is fostering Islamist belief in the existence of global Jewish conspiracies against Muslim interests; rather, it is the misunderstood reality of ongoing social and political transformations between Baghdad and Cairo that is fostering the call for the struggle against Jews.

The ideology of al-Qaida, as reflected in the attacks against the World Trade Center on 9/11, best exemplifies such merging of "death cult, antisemitism and hatred of freedom." (159) The struggle against the Jews, here, is tantamount to the struggle against modern societies and the implied challenges to the traditional order.

Describing anti-Jewish agitation as a result of Islamist anti-modern orientation, Küntzel draws attention to the fact that the threat of antisemitism is not limited to Jews. In many cases, antisemitic attacks are directed against those

representing a challenge to a supposedly authentic Islamic community. The perception of the Twin Towers in Manhattan as a symbol for ‘the global economic power of the Jews’ is an echo of such distorted interpretation of reality; the frequently raised assertion that homosexuality and Satanism are spread by Jewish interest groups to destroy Islamic societies from within, is another. Based on these views, social transformation and changes in values, norms and belief are identified as the deeds of a hidden “Jewish” hand. Such thought does not say anything about Jews, but very much about the perception of change, modern society, and the concept of community.

Küntzel summarizes this as follows:

The aim of the Islamists’ religious war is neither individual freedom nor self-determination of dependent states, but the establishment of a total regime based purely and simply on submission to Allah and his deputies, the Caliphs. Their struggle is merely aimed against those aspects of imperialism and modernity that threaten the foundations of their despotic and patriarchal rule. (131)

This conclusion is important as it allows identifying antisemitism as a threat to Arab-Islamic societies themselves. In fact, it is this aspect that could provide a starting point for Arab intellectuals to publicly challenge antisemitic agitation, as this challenge is not so much about Israel and Jews, but about the very right to be different and to break with traditional values and opinions.

Yet, Küntzel’s work leaves one dissatisfied – and irritated because of its short-sighted reading of Middle Eastern history and its blunt generalizations. His narrative of the history of Islamist movements is guided by two premises: first, since the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood as a mass movement in the 1930s, Islamism has been the driving force behind most major Arab political movements; and second, it was from Nazism that Islamist movements took much of their ideological concepts and strategies.

Both assumptions demonize Islamism and its ideological visions; yet, they are hardly supported by facts. Küntzel’s neglect of all evidence that would challenge his narrative makes it hard to follow the chapters without getting the impression of reading a political pamphlet. For Küntzel, the history of the 20th century follows a straight path from Hassan al-Banna to Osama Bin Laden – with Amin al-Husayni, Sayyid Qutb, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, Yassir Arafat, Ahmed Yassin and Ayman al-Zawahiri only each representing a specific episode of Islamism’s struggle against the Jews. Or, as Küntzel claims:

Palestinian society in the spring of 2002 began to turn itself in reality into that ‘industry of death’ for which Hassan al-Banna had

yearned in 1936. The mass murder of Jewish civilians had become accepted as a self-evident ideal for the average Palestinian. Hamas' antisemitic program was being put into eliminatory practice. (138)

What is missing in this narrative is not only the profound internal frictions and ideological and strategic shifts that brought about today's landscape of Sunni Islamist movements; moreover, neither does the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah, nor Saudi Wahhabism appear to play any significant role in today's Arab-Islamic world. While Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Lebanese Hizbullah and the Turkish AKP (Justice and Development Party) indeed share a history in which antisemitic agitation has played an important role, these organizations can hardly be reduced to an unchanged "yearning for the mass murder of Jewish civilians." In the Turkish arena, the AKP is an example that Islamist organizations are not fixed in an ideological and strategic straitjacket.

Even more misleading, however, is Küntzel's reading of Arab nationalism as being a mere variant of a predominating Islamist current. According to Küntzel, policies of Arab nationalist figure-heads such as Nasser, Sadat and Arafat actually echoed core principles of Islamist thought. For all the repression and infighting that shaped the relations of these Arab nationalist leaders with their Islamist opponents, he argues that their political visions remained close to those of the Brotherhood. This is a reductionist reading of historical sources that covers up the diverse rifts and ambivalences of these ideological currents and political personalities.

Ironically, such reading of Arab nationalism as a variation of Islamism ignores the fact that antisemitism is hardly limited to Islamic currents, but has left its marks in secular and Christian organizations as well. The secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party that was founded by the Lebanese Antun Saada in 1932 is a case in point. To this day, the party remains a major source of antisemitic propaganda in the Syrian and Lebanese context. In its publications, the party, which has made a secular order a priority of its political agenda, does not fall far behind the anti-Jewish agitation voiced by Islamist Hizbullah. In his outstanding study *Qawmiyyu al-mashriq al-'arabi – min drayfus ila garudi* (*The Levant's Arab Nationalists – From Dreyfus to Garaudy*),¹ the Lebanese journalist Hazem Saghieh has developed a theory about this phenomenon: negative images of Jews among Arab nationalist currents facilitated the creation of an Arab

¹ Hazem Saghieh, *Qawmiyyu al-mashriq al-'arabi – min drayfus ila garudi*, (Beirut, 2000).

communal identity by providing an external "Other" that helped foster the sense of belonging.

Yet here again it would be misleading to draw a deterministic picture of Arab nationalist ideological history. In this regard, Küntzel at least acknowledges that in the 1920s and 1930s, anti-Jewish visions were hardly hegemonic amongst Arab nationalist activists. For him, it was the rise of Islamism in the '30s that put an end to any dissident voice calling for a conciliatory approach to the local Jewish population and to Jewish immigrants to Palestine.

Most problematic, however, in Küntzel's analysis, is the role attributed to Nazi Germany in fostering an antisemitic outlook in the Arab population. With regard to the Muslim Brotherhood, Küntzel writes:

Despite frequent assertions to the contrary, the Muslim Brothers were inspired not by the Nasserism of the 1960s, but by the European fascism of the 1930s. Their pre-1951 campaigns were not anti-colonialist, but anti-Jewish. The anti-Jewish passages in the Koran were fused with the antisemitic methods of struggle of the Third Reich and hatred of the Jews acted out as jihad. (3)

In this context, Küntzel depicts Amin al-Husayni as a major player who shaped the Islamist scene in the Middle East. While much of Husayni's collaboration with the Germans has been documented elsewhere, Küntzel draws attention to relations formed between the Mufti and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. For Küntzel, the escape of the Mufti to Cairo in the post-war years and the support he was granted by the Brotherhood illustrates the "fact that the acceptance of antisemitism has grown enormously in the preceding ten years." (47). Nazism, Küntzel asserts, had proved to be "(l)ike an elder brother," backing "the fledgling Islamist movement up with catchword, intellectual encouragement and money." (57)

As in other contexts of Küntzel's work, the problem with this argumentation is not that Nazism did indeed leave its traces in local political culture; it is Küntzel's restricted reading of the existing research on Arab approaches towards Nazism and Fascism that raises concern. Küntzel not only ignores the distinction made by many Arab observers between Nazism and Fascism due to Italy's brutal policies in Libya and Abyssinia, but he does not bother to consider other research that would have questioned his assertion of a dominant antisemitic mood that had developed in the early 1940s in Arab countries under the influence of German propaganda.

Focusing on encounters with Nazism in Egypt and Palestine, it is difficult not to mention the studies of Israel Gershoni and, more recently, René Wildan-

gel, that have provided a new perspective on the existing body of literature.² While most of these recent studies tend to add more questions than to provide answers for old ones, Küntzel ignores much of the uncertainties that prevailed in the literature about this episode of Arab-German encounters.

One of these uncertainties relates to the impact of German activities on the ground. While several contacts are documented in German sources, many others are far less substantiated by archival material, and can in some cases be attributed to rumors that were spread by local sympathizers with the Allies to discredit political opponents. In this respect, several of Küntzel's examples cited to illustrate the evolving bounds between the German regime and Arab activists are questionable. The supposedly German funded Arab Club in Damascus is but one example; the substantial German funding of the Palestinian revolt of 1936-39 is another.

Yet, Küntzel's assertion that an estimated several thousand Nazi war criminals "escaped justice through flight to Egypt" (47) in the post-war years might best illustrate the problem of this study. While the presence of several leading Nazi personalities in post-war Egypt and Syria is well documented – with some of them indeed taking up important positions in the Baathist and Nasserist military and propaganda apparatus – Küntzel's claim of a massive Nazi exodus to the Arab Middle East that allowed for a continuation of the Nazi alliance with its adopted younger ideological brother, Islamism, is dubious.

Such assertions, on which many of Küntzel's conclusions are based, might support an agenda aiming at scandalizing any dialogue and exchange with Islamist organizations and regimes; yet, they neither help uncover the multifaceted – and controversial – encounters of the past between Nazism and local Arab populations, nor do they allow the positioning of antisemitic thought in the broader context of contemporary local political culture. Küntzel's focus on antisemitism as a core feature of Islamist thought and his depiction of Islamism

² See for instance Israel Gershoni, "Egyptian Liberalism in an Age of 'Crisis of Orientation': Al-Risāla's Reaction to Fascism and Nazism, 1933–39," *International Journal for Middle East Studies*, no. 31, 1999, 551–576; Israel Gershoni, "Beyond Anti-Semitism: Egyptian responses to German Nazism and Italian Fascism in the 1930s," *European University Institute, Florence, EUI Working Papers*, no. 32, 2002; Israel Gershoni, "'Der verfolgte Jude.'" Al-Hilals Reaktionen auf den Antisemitismus in Europa und Hitlers Machtergreifung," in G. Höpp/P. Wien/R. Wildangel (eds.), *Blind für die Geschichte? Arabische Begegnungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus*, (Berlin, 2004) 39-72; René Wildangel, "'Der größte Feind der Menschheit'. Der Nationalsozialismus in der arabischen öffentlichen Meinung in Palästina während des Zweiten Weltkriegs," in G. Höpp/P. Wien/R. Wildangel (eds), *Blind für die Geschichte? Arabische Begegnungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus*, (Berlin, 2004) 115-154; and René Wildangel, *Zwischen Achse und Mandatsmacht. Palästina und der Nationalsozialismus*, (Berlin, 2007).

as a near hegemonic force reduces this phenomenon to Islamist currents of today's Arab world. What is worse, this approach neglects many voices that have persistently called for progressive reform and rational answers to the ambivalences of modern social transformations. While antisemitism has indeed left deep traces in Arab political cultures, simplifying polemics hardly serves to identify the implied challenges and to encourage those who have urged reason and change. In this regard, too much attention is placed on the extremes of the contemporary Arab ideology spectrum. Recent research which has shifted the focus to liberal and progressive currents that have long played a role in the political culture of Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad, could provide an alternative perspective to today's dilemmas as well.

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