

Islamic Anti-Semitism. On the Topicality of Matthias Küntzel's study on "The Nazis and the Middle East"

ISSN: 2688-836X



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Submission: 📅 November 11, 2023

Published: 📅 November 24, 2023

Volume 15 - Issue 3

How to cite this article: Johannes Twardella*. Islamic Anti-Semitism. On the Topicality of Matthias Küntzel's study on "The Nazis and the Middle East". *Nov Res Sci.* 15(3). NRS.000864. 2023. DOI: [10.31031/NRS.2023.15.000864](https://doi.org/10.31031/NRS.2023.15.000864)

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Islamic Anti-Semitism

How can the enormous brutality with which Hamas acted on October 7, 2023, against people on the border with the Gaza Strip - mostly citizens of the State of Israel - be explained? People were injured, abused, mutilated and killed: a massacre. This outbreak of unleashed violence, without any restraint, leaves us speechless. Is an explanation even possible? In the current debate, the term "Islamic Anti-Semitism" is repeatedly used? What does this mean and does the reference to it help to explain the brutality of Hamas? The book focussed on here was published in 2019 by the German political scientist and historian Matthias Küntzel entitled "Nazis and the Middle East. How Islamic anti-Semitism came about"¹. In it, the author explores the question of how it can be explained that alongside interpretations of Islam that are characterized by a high degree of tolerance and liberality (and for which numerous practical examples can be found in the long history of coexistence between Muslims and Jews), such an interpretation could emerge that is clearly anti-Semitic. The author's thesis is that this interpretation, that Islamic anti-Semitism by no means emerged naturally from the history of Islam, but is a relatively new phenomenon: it is the result of the reception of European anti-Semitism that emerged in the 19th century, in particular an anti-Semitic reading of the Koran that was developed in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s by ideologues of National Socialism.

A Positive and Negative Relationship with Jews in the Early Period of Islam

Küntzel only deals with early Islam in broad strokes. It is well known that during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad there was both a positive and a negative relationship with Jews. The former can be seen in many passages of the Qur'an, in verses that were proclaimed during the Meccan and at the beginning of the Medinan phase of prophecy and which reveal similarities between the prophecy of Muhammad and Judaism. It can be assumed that these verses were linked to the expectation that the Jews would recognize Muhammad as a prophet and accept the Qur'anic message. However, in Medina, where an Islamic community emerged after the hidgra, a negative attitude towards Jews also developed. This can be attributed to the fact that the Jewish tribes residing in Medina did not recognize Muhammad as a prophet and wanted to maintain their religion as it was. While similarities between the new proclamation and Judaism had previously been emphasized, differences were now marked (e.g., with regard to the direction in which prayers were to be said: no longer towards Jerusalem, but towards Mecca). Following armed conflicts between the Muslims of Medina and the Meccans, who adhered to their pagan religion, there was increasing violence against the Jewish tribes living

¹Küntzel M (2019) Nazis und der Nahe Osten. Wie der islamische Antisemitismus entstand, Hentrich und Hentrich, Berlin Leipzig, Germany.

in Medina. This violence eventually went so far that many of the Jews were robbed of their property, expelled or even killed. The reason for this can be seen in the fact that doubts that could have arisen in the face of little or no success in the war, doubts about Islam and its success, needed to be counteracted.

The structure that regulated the coexistence of Jews and Muslims in the Islamic community was the dhimmi system: within the Islamic territory, Jews received protection from the authorities and the opportunity to practise their religion, but had to pay a poll tax and had fewer rights than Muslims. Within this system, positive relations between Jews and Muslims were certainly possible - there are numerous examples of this in the long shared history of Jews and Muslims. Küntzel points out that there was also anti-Judaism, or more precisely, a feeling of superiority that led to Jews being more or less devalued. And depending on the situation, this went hand in hand with various forms of humiliation.

Küntzel sees this as the decisive difference: while the relationship to Jews within Islam was characterized by a feeling of superiority, in Christianity envy and fear prevailed. The idea of a "Jewish world conspiracy" could therefore not have arisen in Islam, but only against the background of Christianity.

Islamic Anti-Semitism and the Treatise "Islam and Judaism"

European anti-Semitism arose on the basis of Christian anti-Judaism in the second half of the 19th century. Küntzel refers above all to the world economic crisis of 1873, which led to the search for a scapegoat. Liberalism, which was seen as "Jewish", was held responsible. And in this context, Judaism was no longer understood as a religion; instead, the racist construction of the "Semite" emerged.

In what follows, Küntzel focuses on tracing the historical development from which Islamic anti-Semitism emerged as the product of a synthesis of Islamic anti-Judaism and European anti-Semitism. According to Küntzel, a treatise entitled "Islam and Judaism", which was published in 1937 and is attributed to the then Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin El-Husseini, is of particular importance for this development. This treatise argues that the Jews hate Mohammed and Islam. Even in the early days of Islam, this hatred led to the Jews - without any moral inhibitions and with all the means at their disposal - trying to discredit, fight and ultimately kill Muhammad in order to destroy Islam.

In the narrative that the treatise unfolds, the Meccan phase of prophecy and the positive relationship with Jews that existed in this phase are completely ignored. It should also be noted that it was by no means only the Jews living in Medina who harbored doubts about Muhammad's claim to be the prophet of the one God. Rather, Muhammad's prophecy was associated with a credibility problem from the very beginning. The idea that Muhammad's listeners were all immediately convinced by his proclamation is absurd. On the contrary, even Muhammad himself initially harbored doubts about his prophecy. And among the Meccans, to whom the Quranic message was initially addressed, the majority rejected it.

This rejection went so far that at a certain point, Muhammad was no longer sure of his life in Mecca and emigrated to Medina with his followers. In the treatise, however, the doubt about Muhammad's claim to be a prophet is attributed solely to the Jews; indeed, they are stylized as an incarnation of doubt and it is claimed that the Jews spared no means to fight Muhammad and Islam. This is what the treatise says:

"The verses from the Qur'an and Hadith prove to you that the Jews have been the bitterest opponents of Islam and are still trying to destroy it. Do not believe them, they know only hypocrisy and cunning." (248)

At the end of the treatise, a reference to the present is made: Currently - i.e., in 1937 - the Jews would "stretch out their hand towards the holy places" (247), i.e., the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and strive to dominate all of Palestine. They would bring immeasurable suffering to the Arab population. Therefore, the conclusion could only be to reject the partition plan of 1937 (which envisaged 20% of the land for Jews and 80% for the Arab population) and to fight "until your land is free of the Jews" (248). The tract attributed to el-Husseini, as well as his party's threats against all those who were prepared to agree to the partition plan, contributed significantly to its ultimate failure.

Further Writings of Islamic Anti-Semitism

Küntzel explains how Islamic anti-Semitism was subsequently developed further in a number of writings, e.g., in a treatise by the Lebanese Sheikh al-Jisr, who eschatologically declared the alleged battle between Jews and Muslims to be a final battle (for which recourse was made to a hadith, the "Hadith of the Tree and the Stone"). And in the text "Our Struggle with the Jews" by Sayyid Qutb, published in the early 1950s, which also speaks of a war that the Jews are waging against Islam, the Jews appear as the protagonists of secularization and modernity (and anyone who advocates secularization and modernity as a Jew). Last but not least, this series of texts also includes the Hamas Charter of 1988, in which the claim that the Jews intend to destroy Islam is taken up and the eschatological idea is formulated that "the resurrection, i.e., redemption of the Muslims is dependent on the murder of the Jews" (38).

The possibility of reaching a political solution through negotiations is ruled out in the charter by declaring the question of who owns Palestine to be a religious issue. Palestine is "Islamic land", which was legally established by Caliph Omar. However, because it has now been "usurped" by "enemies", it is the duty of every Muslim to go on jihad and liberate the land.

The influence of European anti-Semitism and the ideology of National Socialism can clearly be seen in the Charter's statements on the Jews' alleged quest for world domination: it is claimed that they have power over organizations such as the Lions and Rotary Clubs as well as other "Zionist organizations". Their wealth is enormous and they have taken control of the media worldwide. The French and Russian revolutions were brought about by them, and they were ultimately behind all revolutions. The two world wars

can also be traced back to their activities. And in order to expand their world domination, they had created the UN as an instrument. Last but not least, the charter claims that Zionism is expansive: its aim is to establish rule from the Nile to the Euphrates.

While reference is otherwise made to the Qur'an and various hadiths to substantiate certain claims, in connection with the statements about the "world domination" of the Jews, reference is made to the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" - an anti-Semitic, conspiracy-theory pamphlet that is known to be based on purely fictional sources. This pamphlet thus acquires a status approaching that of the sacred texts (as if it had been divinely revealed).

The Influence of National Socialism and Its Consequences

Küntzel emphasizes that the mass spread of Islamic anti-Semitism is primarily due to the work of the National Socialists. They wanted to prevent the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine at all costs and therefore cooperated with the Muslim Brotherhood. They developed an anti-Semitic reading of the Qur'an and used radio to disseminate it between 1939 and 1945: "They promoted the exclusively anti-Jewish reading of the Koran, popularized the European world conspiracy myths, demonized Zionism and shaped the genocidal rhetoric against Israel." (132)

According to Küntzel, the consequence of Nazi propaganda was not only the anti-Semitic literature and the failure of the

1937 partition plan, but also the failure of the UN partition plan of 1947, which provided for a two-state solution (56% of the British Mandate territory was to go to a Jewish state, 43% to an Arab state), but was not accepted by Israel's Arab neighbors. According to Küntzel, the subsequent war against Israel can therefore be seen as "A kind of aftershock of the previous Nazi war against the Jews" (138). Furthermore, the consequence of Nazi propaganda was "that after the Second World War the Arab world became a region in which radical anti-Semitism spread like nowhere else." (162)

Conclusion

Küntzel's thesis that Islamic anti-Semitism did not emerge naturally from the history of Islam, but is the result of a fusion of Islamic anti-Judaism with European anti-Semitism, in particular that of National Socialism, is entirely plausible. And it is also plausible to use Islamic anti-Semitism to explain the violence that erupted in the massacre on October 7, 2023. It was undoubtedly an important factor, but is not sufficient on its own to explain it.

If Islamic anti-Semitism is not to spread further in the future, it is important that the fusion that emerged in the 1930s is dissolved again and that the liberal and tolerant traditions of Islam take its place. However, this will only be possible if the circumstances under which the Arab population lives - especially in the Gaza Strip, but also in other areas - improve.