



The Mufti of Jerusalem

**Haj-Amin el-Husseini and National-Socialism, by Jennie Lebel,
translated by Paul Münch from Serbian, Belgrade: Čigoja štampa,
2007, 374 pp.**

Reviewed by

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

The Serbian-Israeli historian Jennie Lebel illuminates in this book the relationship between the grand mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husaini, and Adolf Hitler's Nazis. Lebel is an independent academic who lives in Tel Aviv. She has published books on the topic before in Hebrew, including *Hajj Amin ve'Berlin* (Hajj Amin and Berlin, Tel Aviv: Technosdar, 1996) and in Serbian under the same title *Hajj Amin i Berlin* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2003). In both books, she closely follows the mufti's life between 1895 and 1974. In the present version she added chapters with broad views on Arabs and Jews in Palestine.



Adolf Hitler meets Amin al-Husaini in 1941

Jennie Lebel devotes special attention to Amin al-Husaini's activities in Germany and in the area of the former Yugoslavia during the Second World War. She has thus added

many new insights and facts based on her solid archival work. She gleaned Yugoslav, German, and Israeli files especially well. To a much lesser degree she used secondary sources. Consequently, there is a certain imbalance in her book that represents the state of art as of the late nineties. She does not include relevant new literature in Arabic, English, French, or German.¹ To give her the benefit of the doubt, we can only assume that this resulted from the delay between translation and publication.

Her most valuable contribution regards Serbian- and Macedonian-related history.² Among the reprinted papers included in the book she displays, for example, the first page of the official Yugoslav file on "Crimes of the German Occupants and their Helpers" of 10 July 1945. Amin al-Husaini, who had been in French hands since May 1945, was therewith added to a list of war criminals because he engaged in recruiting for Muslim SS divisions in the occupied area. Legally, he was neither a French nor a British subject, so there would have been an opportunity to deliver him directly to the Nuremberg court which started four months later. The grand mufti wrote in his memoirs that he was aware of a potential extradition, though the French, as well as Arabs and other Muslims, wanted to protect him.



The mufti's word on *Islam and Jewry* was spread among Muslim soldiers

According to the author, the Yugoslav leader, Tito, decided to remove the mufti's name from the list of war criminals. She adds a secret communication from the Yugoslav Embassy in Paris to the French Foreign Ministry sent in April 1946. The text explains some disputes about the mufti: France refused a possible extradition because it did not wish to alienate Muslims in her colonies. Besides this, an Anglo-French extradition agreement applied only to common criminals, not war criminals. London likewise did not present the case to the UN Commission for War Crimes. Thus, in May 1946 the mufti "escaped" from Paris to Cairo, resuming his Islamic and Palestinian roles. Jennie Lebel thus provides the reader with fresh insights.

The grand mufti's life spurs controversies. A shortcoming of this book is that the author does not show evidence of research into the Middle Eastern dimension of the history. She maintains, for example, that Arab nationalism in Palestine was not a progressive movement with definite social goals, but only an opposition to Jewish settlements; Muslims worship the black stone *ka'aba*; and Arab crowds streamed to Jerusalem in 1929, when a bloody anti-Jewish pogrom started, failing to tell the story of what happened before this. The competing narratives should be included. Only with this information can the reader reach an independent judgment.

The author sums up the grand mufti as a man with a self-proclaimed title who was one of the greatest international criminals of the first half of the twentieth century. Some of Jennie Lebel's arguments open the way for productive discussion. I shall repeat one of her arguments in the first sentence of each of the six following paragraphs, followed by a short discussion.

- The mufti was not ready to do anything gratis (138, 146). However, Lebel shows the restless nationalist and pan-Islamic efforts to which he dedicated the whole of his long life. That he managed to get money from so many sources indicates his determination. There is some confusion in the book about his projects. The files show us how much he, and about two dozen others, including Arab leaders like Rashid Ali al-Kailani, Shakib Arslan, Mansur Daud, Kamil Mruwa, and Sharif Sharaf, received monthly during the Nazi era: the mufti 50,000 Reichsmarks plus 25,000 in foreign currency; the Iraqi 75,000 Reichsmarks plus 25,000 in foreign currency out of the foreign minister's fund, financed by looted Jewish money. Al-Husaini and al-Kailani condoned Nazi Germany's horrific racist extermination policy. Following the mufti's example, many moved to the totalitarian and anti-democratic side of history. Thus, he repeatedly did his people a great disservice. Following generations still have a very long journey ahead of them before they can overcome his stark and deadly legacy. Lebel's book is of utmost importance for the major debate which must still take place in the Middle East concerning the mufti and his unfortunate policy with regard to the Holocaust.
- The German Arab radio propaganda stations were all under the mufti's command (138). No, the envoy Fritz Grobba and his Arab Committee decided within the Foreign Office with regard to the main contents of the programming. The protocols of the weekly sessions are still available. The British and Americans also analyzed the broadcasts regularly. The mufti was an asset for the Axis powers, but only partially. Before he went on air, as a rule, he showed his speeches to the Germans. He did this before all public appearances. As early as 1937, he proposed German-Arabic broadcasting to the Middle East.
- The Germans had not declared their position on Arab independence (142). On the contrary, they did it in a broadcast manifesto on 5 December 1940, in cooperation with the Italians; Berlin was fully sympathetic to the Arabs in their wish to gain national independence. This was also published in Arabic. The Arab National Committee of Beirut responded to the mufti's initiative "in the name of the Arabs." On 14 January 1941 the committee explained in point two of its manifesto that Arabs consider that they are an equally high race of mankind and that they are in no way lagging behind the Europeans. This shows at least some reaction to Hitler's racial doctrines. The committee asked the German government

about the meaning of independence. It requested that Germany prove its sincerity for support of the Arabs - "unlike Great Britain" - officially and practically. The committee also expressed its wish for a "Greater Arabian State" that would include Greater Syria and West Asian Arab states with an option for the unification with North African Arab states such as Egypt. But the mufti wanted more from the Axis powers, including Japan, and he succeeded.³

- The mufti indicated that to solve the Jewish problem "in Palestine he will use the same methods as the Axis powers will in Europe." No and yes. No, because between 1940 and 1942 the mufti drafted about fifteen versions of a joint German-Italian declaration on the Arab cause. Point 7 in the German version also suggests solving the Jewish problem in Palestine by the "same method as has been used in the Axis states" (leaving options open if we see differences between Berlin and Rome). In Lebel's version this past tense is incorrectly changed to the future (84): by the "same method that **will** be applied for the solution of the Jewish problem in Axis states." Yes, given the Holocaust in 1941, it was shameful of the mufti and the Iraqi premier Rashid Ali al-Kailani to connect the fate of their people to the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis. Indeed, this reveals their traditional hatred of Jews. There is solid proof that both knew about the Holocaust. In 1942 they asked to visit a concentration camp in person. Four men in their entourage were allowed to visit the Sachsenhausen camp in Berlin's vicinity.⁴ The mufti himself delivered the most compelling evidence in his Damascus memoirs when he explains that Himmler told him in mid-1943 of "having liquidated about three million Jews so far."⁵
- The mufti's ambition to show himself as a pan-Islamic leader did not gain him an advantage in his contacts with the Third Reich. The opposite is true. He impressed the Germans very much with the tradition of political Islam. This elevated him higher than Rashid Ali al-Kailani, who stood only for Iraq. Behind the mufti were Palestine - he signed his correspondence as *Al-Mufti Al-Akbar Min Filastin*, The Grand Mufti of Palestine - and the Muslim world. Hitler saw parallels to his pan-Germanism. SS chief Himmler thought that the mufti was a kind of "Muslim Pope." All reports about the effectiveness of the mufti, for instance in recruiting Muslims into some Serbian or Turkestan SS divisions, seemed to confirm this duality of being an Arab of Palestine and an Islamic leader of Jerusalem.

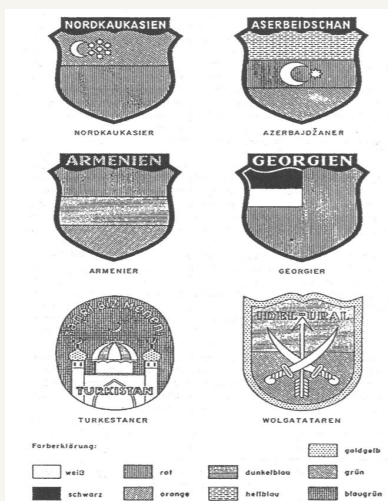
But there was more. A German report about the mufti's visit to Croatia says that in April of 1943 he appeared there in four garbs: Croatian, German-Italian, Arabian, and Muslim. The mufti was a fashionable master playing the game of multiple identities.

- In a future edition some mistakes and misspellings can easily be corrected, among them the following: The diplomat Fritz Grobba was not a "prominent orientalist." He held a PhD in law, though he knew three Islamic languages. Orientalists or Arabists are scholars who have studied Islamic languages, history, and culture. They teach or research in this scholarly profession. Hitler and the mufti met only once (there was no "first meeting"). He did not give the mufti a bulletproof vest and shake hands (241). Their interpreter was Paul Schmidt. The German-Egyptian, John W. Eppler, most likely was not present, so that the cafe-lemonade story as told by Leonard Mosley is unconfirmed (111). That meeting between Hitler and the mufti is well documented in motion pictures. There is no evidence of John

W. Eppler being present.

- Words need to be corrected, such as "Muntadda"; "Khalid" (not "Khalil"); "Al Hud"; "Shakib" (not "Shahib"); "Arslan"; "Herbert" (not "Otto") von Bismarck; Husain "Ga-afar" (not "Gafer"), alias John W. Eppler; and Rashid "Rida" (not "Rheza"). The title "Hajj" is given after the pilgrimage. It is not hyphenated with the name. Also, Semites do not exist. Thus, there is no "Semitic type" or "Semitic mufti" (135, 241). Enlightened academics should not use such misleading terms.

Jennie Lebel sometimes does not recognize the mufti's patriotic motives. It was natural that Middle Easterners opposed foreign masters as well as more immigrants to Palestine. The use of European rivalries to their advantage was also normal. The mufti's opposition was to a certain degree not extraordinary. It changed with the Nazis in power. Gradually he crossed the line in counting on and aiding Hitler, who had already published his genocidal aims against Jews in 1924. Moreover, Hitler told the grand mufti about similar prospects for Jews in the Middle East in late 1941. With this knowledge of a possible upcoming regional and an ongoing European Holocaust, Amin al-Husaini mixed the old traditional and the new racial hatred of Jews into a new ideology which served the totalitarian cause quite willingly.



Insignia of some Troops with Muslims in German Service

For his part, the mufti said in 1961 that the Nazis needed no persuasion in their racism against Jews. But Hitler and the mufti influenced each other for the worse. The mufti missed unique chances in 1939. Without any higher education, he lacked a concept of historical compromise. His all-or-nothing approach still persists. Much is yet to be told about his life based on Arabic, American, British, German, Hebrew, French, Russian, and Italian sources, including the thirty years after 1945. Jennie Lebel's book provides a solid basis for research which for many years will challenge American, Middle Eastern, and European historians.

[1]. *Ibrahim Abu Shaqra, Al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini munzu wiladatihi hatta thaurat 1936* (Al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini from his birth until the revolution of 1936, Al-Lazaqiyya: Dar al-Manara 1998), I [Arabic]; *Abd al-Karim al-Umar: Muzakki-rat al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini* (The memoirs of al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husaini, Damascus: Al-Ahali Publishers, 1999) [Arabic]; Gerhard Höpp, *Mufti-Papiere. Briefe, Memoranden, Reden und Aufrufe Amin al-Husainis aus dem Exil, 1940-1945* (The mufti papers: Amin al-Husaini's letters, memoranda, speeches, and declarations from exile, 1940-1945, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Publisher, 2001) [German]; Chantal Metzger, *L'empire colonial français dans la stratégie du Troisième Reich (1936-1945)* (The French colonial empire in the strategy of the Third Reich, Brussels: Peter Lang Publishers, 2002), I, II [French]; Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Gold, Bankiers und Diplomaten: Zur Geschichte der Deutschen Orientbank* (Gold, bankers and diplomats: The history of the German Orient Bank, 1906-1946, Berlin: Trafo Publisher, 2002) [German]; Gerhard Höpp, Peter Wien, and René Wildangel, *Blind für die Geschichte? Arabische Begegnungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus* (Blind for history? Arab encounters with National Socialism, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Publisher, 2004) [German]; Shlomo Aronson, *Hitler, the Allies, and the Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, ed., *Germany and the Middle East, 1871-1945* (Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2004); Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers, *Halbmond und Hakenkreuz, Das "Dritte Reich", die Araber und Palästina (Crescent moon and swastika: The Third Reich, the Arabs, and Palestine*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006) [German]; Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, ed., *Deutschland und der Mittlere Osten im Kalten Krieg* (Germany and the Middle East during the Cold War, Leipzig: University Publisher, 2006) [German]; Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarian, Totalitarian, and Pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932-1941* (London: Routledge, 2006); René Wildangel, *Zwischen Achse und Mandatsmacht: Palästina und der Nationalsozialismus* (Between Axis and Mandate power: Palestine and National Socialism, Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2007). [German]

[2]. See also Jennie Lebel, *Until The "Final Solution": The Jews in Belgrade 1521-1942* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2008); Jennie Lebel, *Tide & Wreck: History of the Jews of Vardar, Macedonia* (Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2008).

[3]. Federal Archive Berlin, BArchB, AA Roll Nr. 61123, *Muzakkira min al-Lajna al-Wataniyya fi Bairut* (Memorandum by the Arab National Committee of Beirut), 255092-255147.

[4]. Günter Morsch and Astrid Ley, eds., *Das Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen 1936-1945* (Sachsenhausen concentration camp 1936-1945, Berlin: Metropol, 2008). [German]

[5]. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, "Amin al-Husaini and the Holocaust: What did the Grand Mufti Know?" *World Politics Review*, 8 May 2008.

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