



## Arab Responses To The Holocaust

### *From empathy to denial in an early discourse*

I cannot think of a more timely subject than the Arab representation of the Holocaust. The authors of this volume fill a lacuna in a field in which monographs and country case studies are dominant. Meir Litvak—who is well known for his studies on Shi'a scholars, democracy, and antisemitism in the Arab world—and Esther Webman—who is a recognized authority on Palestinian and Euro-Muslim Holocaust perceptions—are especially qualified to carry out this research. Working at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies of Tel Aviv University, their knowledge of Arabic and other languages enables them to delve deeply into the subject matter.



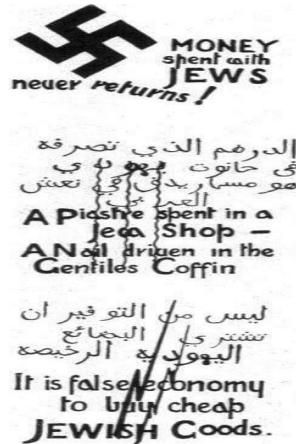
Photo: W. Schwanitz

Cairo in the 1950s: Amin al-Husaini swayed the Arab discourse on the Holocaust and Israel from Egypt and Lebanon until the 1970s

Can we look at Arab approaches to the Holocaust as “discourse”—at least in the sense of academic studies carried out according to the rules of scholarship, governed, above all, by the discovery and substantiation of facts, evidence, and reasoning?

This is highly doubtful. Early on, the Arabs’ frightful lack of empathy for Jewish suffering is quite evident. The denial of the “other’s” right to exist and the unremitting propagation of pernicious falsehoods and confabulations all lead to distortion that is the antithesis of scholarship. The discourse, to the extent that we can characterize it as such, is still in its infancy.

Most of what is written in the Arab world on the Holocaust belongs in the realm of crude propaganda. A bare handful of works in Arabic does offer Middle Eastern readers the means to independently move on to a higher stage of historical consciousness. The Syrian scholar Najda Fathi Safwa, for example, edited a collection of German documents and there are also a few European works translated into Arabic.<sup>1</sup>



A leaflet of anti-Jewish mass propaganda in Palestine as reported by Iwo Jorda, the Austrian Consul General from 1933 to 1938 in Jerusalem where a most active Nazi party group swayed Muslims

Unfortunately, Arab readers often ignore European works for the “guilt complex” with which they are purportedly imbued. Close to seven decades after the embers of Auschwitz went cold, there are just two dozen research studies by Arabs. Half of them were written by historians who made use of material gleaned from German archives.<sup>2</sup>

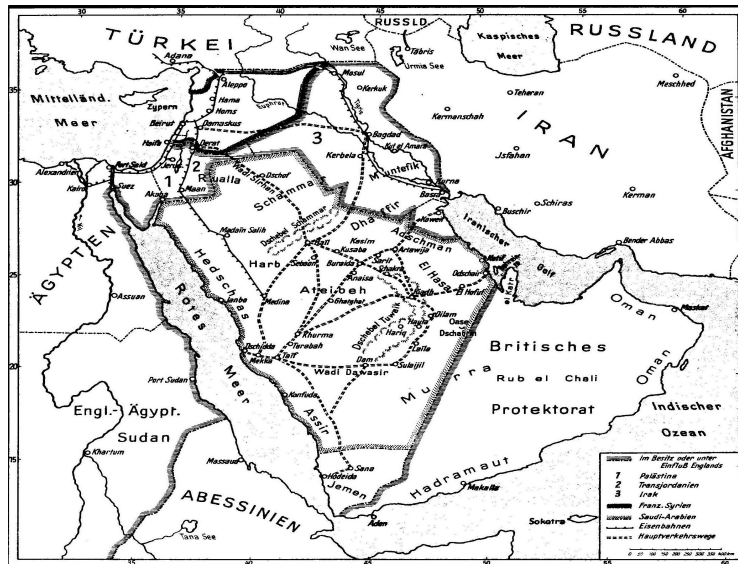
Thus, the Arab basis for any real discourse is somewhat like ice in spring: simply too thin to rely on. As a result, Arab perceptions are generally poisoned by a volatile mix of high emotions and preposterous misinformation. Moreover, information perceived to have a foreign provenance is immediately suspect and swiftly discounted—with all too predictable results.

The authors know all of this very well. They examined the question of whether Arab attitudes to the Holocaust constitute a monolithic, coherent narrative (they do not) and the various factors that affect them. Litvak and Webman demonstrate that until about 1990, there was a certain consistency in Arab perceptions. However, after that time, traces of diversification could be detected. The authors focused on academic and popular texts that appeared in the Arab states bordering Israel and relied heavily on the Arab press and literature of the region.

The first part of the book contains four chapters with historical case studies, the first of which deals with the Arab world’s reaction to news of the Holocaust in the formative years 1945 to 1948. The subsequent three chapters in that cluster deal with Arab views on three separate issues. They are the 1952 German–Israeli reparations agreement; the apprehension and trial of Adolf Eichmann 1960–1962; and the Catholic Church’s stance on the Holocaust, including Pope John Paul II’s public apology for the role of the Christian world.

The second part of the book focuses on thematic analyses of Arab views on the Holocaust and is divided into seven chapters confronting issues such as denial and justification; equation of Zionism and Nazism; purported links between Zionists and Nazis; Arab perceptions of Nazis; the Palestinian *nakba*; and new approaches after 1990.

The most encouraging chapter of this otherwise gloomy study is the last one, devoted to new approaches and the breaking of taboos. We learn, for example, that the liberal Lebanese writer and editor Hazim Saghiya challenged the traditional Arab notion that “the Holocaust does not concern us.” In Davos, Saif al-Islam al-Qadhdhafi, son of the Libyan dictator, criticized Arabs who deny the Holocaust, “because it was a historical fact, discovered by the Red Army, which liberated Auschwitz.”



The Middle East as center for Nazi propaganda and Hitler's next target to extend the Holocaust after the fall of Moscow

In Nazareth, the Israeli Arab lawyer Khalid Kassab Mahamid built the first and only Arab museum of the Holocaust, which is housed in one of the rooms of his law offices. The Egyptian author and editor Jamal al-Ghitani opined that Arabs should not belittle the brutality of the Nazis. The late Lebanese journalist and intellectual Joseph Samaha and the newspaper columnist Jihad al-Khazin turned against Arab identification with Western Holocaust deniers like Roger Garaudy. Samaha, a Christian, said that Europe’s guilt complex should be viewed as a positive phenomenon. Moreover, he criticized the common Arab claim that the Holocaust is what lay behind the establishment of the State of Israel.

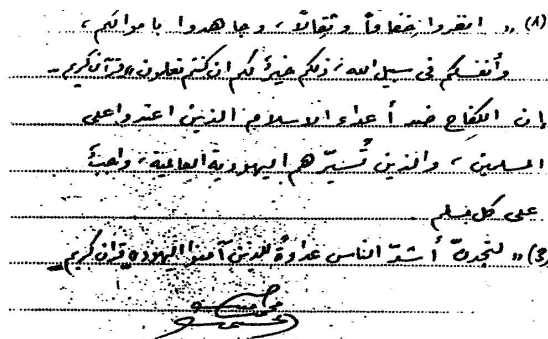
Indeed, this book is a veritable cornucopia of information on an ever-complex and emotional issue. It is also a truly pioneering piece of research that will swiftly come to occupy a leading place in the literature on the Holocaust and on the Arab world. To their great credit, the authors did not engage in polemics.

Rather, they gave fair accounts even in cases in which the reader cannot but cringe at the baseness of some Arab allegations. The authors readily acknowledge the fact that certain themes have not been dealt with in the book. One of the most important questions left unanswered is the extent to which Arab Holocaust denial affected the Arab–Israeli conflict and various missed opportunities for peace.<sup>3</sup>

Litvak and Webman discuss various Arab internal disputes, though the protagonists are not always clearly identified. But their identity, of course, is no riddle. After 1945, the Arabs who sided with the Nazis during the war continued down the same path. Suffice it to mention that the Lebanese Kamil Muruwwa and the Egyptian Kamal ad-Din Jalal were both on Berlin's payroll.

For that reason, it is important to examine not only their post-Holocaust views, but also their behavior until that point. This is especially so in the case of Jamal al-Husaini and 150 of his Arab disciples, all of whom received a monthly stipend from Berlin. The Grand Mufti acted as the disburser of the money. Some of the men were destined to become Arab leaders, such as Anwar as-Sadat and the Syrian Maruf ad-Dawalibi. What about the responsibility of those Arabs who served the Nazis directly? Anwar as-Sadat sincerely overcame his Islamist and Nazi ideologemes. He welcomed Israel in the region. That, however, is still the rare exception.

This book also helps explore the myth that the Arabs had nothing to do with the Holocaust. German archives contain documents that clearly point to Arab involvement and culpability. As we now know, it was not just Iraq's ex-premier Rashid Ali al-Kailani and Amin al-Husaini who dealt with Hitler. Moreover, there was a certain nexus between the Arab region and the Third Reich that did not end in 1945. Al-Husaini influenced the "discourse" until the 1970s. He guided the Islamists who justified it; initiated the 1952 effort against German reparations; hired Nazi fugitives; built a global network to foster the cause; directed the Muslim Brotherhood; and developed Eurasian Islamist bases in Kabul, Karachi, Tehran, London, Geneva, Hamburg, and Munich. Men of his Islamist networks propagated their views across the Middle East.



- 1.) Koran 9, 41: "Zieheth aus, leicht und schwer, und eifert mit Gut und Blut in Allahs Weg. Solches ist besser für euch, so ihr es begreift."
  - 2.) Der Kampf gegen die Feinde des Islams, die sich an den Muslimen vergingen und die das Weltjudentum in Marsch setzt; ist für jede Muslim Pflicht.
  - 3.) Koran 5, 85: "Wahrlich, du wirst finden, dass unter allen Menschen die Juden den Gläubigen am meisten Feind sind."
- gez. Mohammed Amin El Husseini.

Verantwortlich für  
die Übersetzung: *AM. Husseini*

Amin al-Husaini directed jihad verses against the "world Jewry:"  
the Nazis used it often in their radio broadcasts to the Middle East

In this context it should be pointed out that the Middle East and Europe were traditionally inter-twined. Islamism received a major push from the concerted German–Ottoman jihadization of Islam in World War I.

The Armenians were subjected to genocide rooted in that ideology and it claimed the lives of 1.5 million—at least according to what Turkish War Minister Enver Pasha told Gustav Stresemann in 1916.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the army leader Kemal Pasha wanted to unleash jihad against the Jews of Palestine as well. Fortunately, the intervention of certain Turks and foreign envoys prevented this from taking place.



After the jihadization of Islam in World War I Enver Pasha told Gustav Stresemann in early 1916 of having killed up to 1.5 million Armenians

There is no denying that Islamism has demonstrated a genocidal strain or that extreme religious and racial ideology has twice led to genocide in a single century. In one case, it was due to the idea of “superiority over inferior infidels” and in the other, “superiority over inferior races.” Both Hitler and al-Husaini wanted to eliminate those whom they saw as the enemy. They unified ideological and racial reasoning. Both had been working to achieve that goal since the 1920s. Two decades later, both found in each other their natural ally and in mid-1943 Heinrich Himmler told al-Husaini of having killed three million Jews thus far.<sup>5</sup>

Litvak and Webman make clear that while Arabs acknowledge the Armenian massacre and empathize with the victims—even though the slaughter was carried out by fellow Muslims—they hold very different views on the Holocaust. The reason is their perception that the Holocaust is linked to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Litvak’s and Webman’s excellent book helps elevate the discourse on this compelling issue to a new level.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

**Meir Litvak, Esther Webman:** From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 435 pages

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz is a historian of the Middle East and German Middle East policy. He is the author of four books and the editor of ten others, including Germany and the Middle East, 1871-1945 (Markus Wiener, Princeton 2004).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Najda Fathi Safwa, *Al-'Alam al-'Arabi Fi Watha'iq Sirriyya Almaniyya 1937–1941* [The Arab World in German Secret Documents 1937–1941], (Beirut, 2006); Ziyad Muna, (ed.), *Jirhard Hubb: Al-'Arab fi al-Muhraqa an-Naziyya: Dahhaya Mansiyun?* [Gerhard Höpp: The Arabs in the Nazi Holocaust—Forgotten Victims?] [Arabic], trans. Muhammad Jadid (Damascus, 2006). An English version was published as: “Gerhard Höpp: In the Shadow of the Moon: Arab Inmates in Nazi Concentration Camps,” in Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, (ed.), *Germany and the Middle East, 1871–1945* (Princeton NJ, 2004), pp. 216–240.

<sup>2</sup> Wajih Abd as-Sadiq Atiq, Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, (eds.), *Misr wa Almaniya fi al-Qirnain at-Tasia Ashara wa al-Ishrin fi dau al-Watha'iq* [Egypt and Germany in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century as Reflected in Archives] [Arabic], (Cairo, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Haim Handwerker, “The road not taken, Egypt’s Nasser tried to explore the possibility of peace with Israel,” *Haaretz*, July 20, 2001; “24 Shanim Lifnei Sadat” [24 Years Before Sadat] [Hebrew], *Haaretz* February 1, 2002; “Adil Shabhun, Sirri Lilghaya Watha'iq Almaniya” [Top Secret German Documents] [Arabic], *Akhir Sa'a* (Cairo), September 12, 2001; Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, “Teguva” [Hebrew], *Haaretz*, February 22, 2002; see my article, “Vermittlung Ägypten-Israel und Dr. Günther Pawelke,” [German and part English] *DAVO-Nachrichten* (December, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See my article: “Immer guter Laune: Herbert Gutmann und die Deutsche Orientbank,” [German] Vivian J. Rheinheimer (ed.) *Herbert M. Gutmann. Bankier in Berlin. Bauherr in Potsdam. Kunstsammler* (Leipzig, 2007), 61–77.

<sup>5</sup> “Amin al-Husaini and the Holocaust: What did the Grand Mufti Know?” *World Politics Review*, May 8, 2008.