



Looking Into HAMAS

Islamist Constituents of the Palestinian-Israeli Confrontation

Reviewed by

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz*

The German-French academic Wolfgang Freund conducted field studies in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank during the years before the millennial turn. Originally he had in mind a comprehensive study on "social-welfare institutions" connected to *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, Hamas, in the Gaza Strip, which is administered by the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Freund, known as the founder and editor-in-chief of the trilingual quarterly *The Third World* during the seventies and eighties, used typical methods of field investigation, such as visits to the relevant institutions on the ground and interviews with the heads and staff of Hamas. He worked then at the *Institut de Recherche et d'Etudes sur la Communication of the Universite Pantheon-Assas de Paris II*.

Field Studies, Interviews

Additionally, he promoted an empirical project with students from the Islamic University in Gaza about life perceptions of Palestinian students. But the authorities of the *Islamic University* finally refused cooperation, obviously fearing the involvement of a foreign academic institution.

In the end, as Wolfgang Freund puts it, there was a rapidly declining atmosphere with regard to daily life in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. So it became impossible for him in early 2000 to finish his project. The outbreak of the so-called *al-Aqsa intifada* during the second half of that year did the rest.

Nevertheless, his Hamas-related findings of three years in the Palestinian territories are worthwhile and provoke some questions. Disparate as they may seem to the reader at first glance, one can come to three major conclusions.

First, Wolfgang Freund has created with his interviews new sources catching the spirit of the time within the Hamas leadership. He started with the late Ismail Abu Shanab, an engineer in civilian life, and the physician Mahmud al-Zahar as interview partners. Their topic was the history and philosophy of Hamas. The outcome underlines patterns of common arguments, summarized by Freund:

** The Palestinians must never lose contact with history. By recalling it, they remain able to deal with the present and the future, putting things into the right perspective. If they neglect or forget history, they will become victims of any kind of manipulation.*

The reader may ask if this is not the classical approach of an agitator who wants to explain himself and his function in "putting things into the right perspective" with the aim of manipulating the public perceptions.

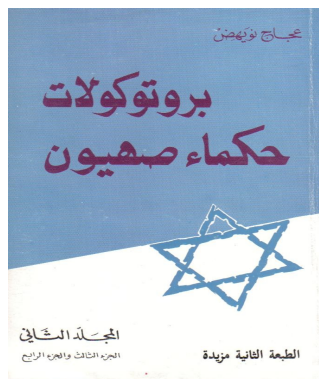
The only problem is that he tailors this "history" to his political needs. So as good as it is to turn to history, this interpretation can just as easily become an indoctrination.

** In the Ottoman Empire the whole region, Greater Syria, was an open space without borders. The system was accepted by everybody, since the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic entity. Things changed after World War I with the creation [by Britain and France] of nation states such as Iraq, Transjordan, Lebanon and Syria. Behind the scenes was the Zionist project masterminded by Britain via the Balfour Declaration in 1917.*

True, many Muslims have the feeling of having lost something, a greater Islamic unity and civilization, which the Ottoman Empire used to be. Whatever the shortcomings of the Ottomans, there were no artificial frontiers in the region, only one government with a set of commonly accepted guidelines. Even more, this loss illustrates the impression of having been outmaneuvered by great powers with their nation states and secretly by a hidden Zionist project. Thus, Hamas leaders show no deep insight into world history nor the slightest understanding of national aspirations in the European sense of the word. How could they? They move in a pre-scientific field that provides fruitful soil for conspiracy theories. Their approach is a tool in the political fight for galvanizing their people.

** The Jews are everywhere in the world. They control everything and continue to manipulate the present and future of humanity. They are always a Trojan Horse to their country of residence and work in favor of corruption. The Russian immigration to Israel reveals this, since a third of the immigrants are basically non-Jews.*

With these words of both Islamists, Freund tells us how deeply rooted are the contents of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Of course, outstanding Arab politicians and intellectuals have recently explained the forgery of the "Protocols." But it seems to have had almost no impact on the consciousness of the common woman and man. The "Protocols" are available in their Arab versions in many bookshops, and a TV series was made about them. Rarely has one mind-poisoner had more influence. The reader wonders about the state of enlightened mass influence in a region where people learn more about such falsifications than about world history.



A Forgery: "Protocols," Volume I,
Syria Damascus 1990, 2nd Edition

** No Arab state can accept Israel in the midst of the Middle East. The normalization with Israel remains artificial. Examples of this are Egypt and Jordan. All professional associations there refuse contacts with Israeli counterparts. Israel remains a "foreign element" in the region, which by definition is an Islamic entity. The crusaders maintained their occupation of the region for about 200 years but finally were defeated. Islam will do the same to the Zionists. Jews and Christians living as a minority within of Islamic rule could, on the other hand, be accepted. We combat Israel, not Jews. Al-Zahar gave the example of the Egyptian Copts, who have been living peacefully for 1,500 years under the Islamic Egyptian leadership.*

These rough figures and the thinking that only the youngest religion of the big three should define the whole region lead the reader to the heart of the conflict. Hamas leaders show no acceptance of Israel at all, and every truce they accepted in their battle against an ancient element of the Middle Eastern fabric has been broken in order to consolidate their power. True, the cold peace between Arab countries and Israel is not encouraging. On the other hand, many Copts could tell a story of trouble. There is an ongoing struggle by the Egyptian elite to maintain the position of Copts as co-heirs of a great civilization. Where are learned Palestinians doing the same and confronting narrow-minded Islamists?

License To Kill

With an eye on the suicide and car bombings both Islamists said they don't want to harm civilians, but al-Zahar brought up the essential point: "All Israelis are finally military people. As young as 17 or 18 years old, they join the army for three years, after which they are soldiers for life." The allusion was clear to Wolfgang Freund: any Israeli remained for this Islamist, under any circumstances, an enemy soldier. What are the Islamist's words if not a license to kill?

In subsequent interviews with Ismail Abu Shanab, Mahmud al-Zahar and Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi - the latter survived a helicopter strike upon his vehicle in Gaza City in mid July 2003 - there are indications of how these Hamas leaders see themselves and the future.

** We are not terrorists. We fight for our national goals, not for selfish reasons. The next era, the future, is ours. It will be Islamic . . . Islam is the infrastructure for everything. Most of our lawyers, engineers, doctors etc. are clearly devoted to the Islamic cause. But we don't want any confrontation - a clash of civilizations - with the West. On the other hand, the West should become open to Islam.*

They argue that any Israeli is an enemy soldier to be eliminated, yet they don't see themselves as terrorists. The reader may wonder how an indigenous movement would look that would push these Islamists to where they belong: at the radical sideline of the mainstream Palestinian society. The demand that the West should be open to Islam can under such circumstances easily be understood as a potential threat.

My **second** conclusion: In Freund's interviews with Jamal Mansur, the reader may discover other important clues. Mansur, who died in an Israeli helicopter attack on his office at the end of July 2001, said this: "With the growing numbers of these Muslims in European countries it will become easier for them to live in harmony with the societies, provided that things do not contradict beliefs or run into con-frontation with their beliefs. The European governments also have their obligations. They must not consider the Islamic minorities as enemies."

As Freund pointed out, if the minority reaches a critical mass, it would not be a minority anymore. At this point, new rules of cohabitation would have to be elaborated because the "minority" would have new demands and rights. "They want to promote themselves, and the 'majority' may become afraid of them," Freund opined. Mansur said again that they would have no problem with their Christian minority.

Third, something in the perception of the self and the other is going wrong on the side of the Islamists. Mansur loved to compare Islam with the sun: "When looking into it we might get blind, but because she shines, we can work and see things." The Islamists would be in a transitional state and not able to impose on people things that they perhaps don't want. "But in the future we are going to try to introduce the principles of Islam." He made clear that they would not obey democratic rules for instance in the case of marriage between two of the same gender: "In Islamic legislation the legal consequence is killing, the death penalty . . . Even if you have a majority of people who might accept such things, there is no way to comply." Who wants to get burned in such a sun?

This book illustrates the basic organization and thinking on the part of Islamists. On the other hand, it also shows ongoing changes in European societies that influence foreign policy there. Wolfgang Freund demonstrated this. He assured Jamal Mansur that he doesn't believe that the Americans have an authentic interest in the people of the Middle East. "Their main concern is oil from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, plus security arrangements to ensure that the oil will always be flowing."

Wolfgang Freund: Looking into HAMAS and Other Constituents of the Palestinian-Israeli Confrontation. Volume 2 of Controversies from the Promised Land, a series of Social Sciences Publications, edited by Wolfgang Freund. Frankfurt: Peter Lang Publisher, 2002. 200 pages, numerous figures and documents. \$30.95, paperback.

**Dr. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz is author of Gold, Bankers, and Diplomats: A History of the German Orient Bank 1906-46 and editor of Germany and the Middle East in the Cold War, and author of German Islam Policy, From Empire to Present (forthcoming).*