



Book Briefs

Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11

by Matthias Küntzel

Translated by Colin Meade

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In his famous essay on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” first published more than 40 years ago, historian Richard Hofstadter discussed the powerful role in human events played by “myth,” which he meant both in its classical literary sense of a narrative of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold a people’s worldview, as well as in its commonplace definition as a widely held but false belief. The Columbia University professor commented on the particular perniciousness of political myths, noting that their persistent quality makes it likely that at some point they will actually have been around a sufficiently long time and been expounded vehemently enough by their proponents that fantasies have become “conventional wisdom” and are beginning to influence policy in the real world.

Two such myths, nowadays broadly accepted across the spectrum of America’s political and academic elites, have acquired near canonical status and are invoked by way of preface to most discussions of Middle East politics. The first myth is that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is the key to solving all the other problems in the Middle East. The second is that anti-Semitism in the Arab–Islamic world is “understandable” as a response to

actions undertaken by the State of Israel. The presence of both myths is widely evidenced at the international conference convening in Annapolis, Maryland, as these lines are being written. Just before the summit a number of stalwarts of the foreign policy establishment published an open letter to President George W. Bush warning of “devastating consequences in the region and beyond” should the meeting not “produce results relevant to the daily lives of Israelis and Palestinians” and suggesting falsely, if unintentionally, that myriad other challenges in the region would in any way be mitigated if only this issue were addressed. At the same time various editorialists called on both the United States and the European Union to soften their boycott of Hamas, effectively asking them either to overlook the demand in its covenant that Israel be “obliterated” or to discount the threat as mere rhetorical excess.

The pundits in particular would benefit immensely from reading *Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11* by Matthias Küntzel, now available in an English translation by Colin Meade. Küntzel, a German political scientist, served as senior adviser to the German Green party’s parliamentary caucus in the 1980s before returning to graduate school where he received a doctorate *summa cum laude* from the University of Hamburg for a dissertation on German nuclear policy from Adenauer to Brandt (an English translation of the work, *Bonn and the Bomb: German Politics and the Nuclear Option*, was published in 1995). He subsequently edited an anthology of responses by leading thinkers of the German left to Daniel J. Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, as well as another volume featuring debates among Goldhagen, Andrei Markovits, and others before going on to write a well-received 2000 study on the

causes and significance of the Kosovo conflict, *Der Weg in den Krieg. Deutschland, die Nato und das Kosovo* (“The Road to War: Germany, NATO and Kosovo”). The last mentioned work is telling because, as Küntzel has now conceded, he “consciously avoided the whole area of Islamism and jihad, wishing, as an author with roots in the political left, to avoid if possible terms that might have racist connotations.” The admission is remarkable not only because such *mea culpas* are rare among academics but because it comes from a scholar whose previous focus on German anti-Semitism and post-World War II German politics puts him in a unique position to appreciate the real world consequences of paranoid ideologies.

In any event, Küntzel now writes that “on September 11, [2001], my avoidance strategy collapsed along with the Twin Towers.” After immediately embarking on a year immersed in the literature on the origins of Islamism and then researching its links to the National Socialism that he had previously studied, Küntzel published *Djihad und Judenhass. Über den neuen antijüdischen Krieg* (“Jihad and Jew-hatred: About the New Anti-Jewish War”) in 2002. The current translation is an updated version of this volume whose basic thesis is that Islamist terrorism and anti-Semitism are products of the ideological fever swamps rather than American or Israeli policies. In the highly charged political climate of the times, Küntzel’s former political allies turned on him, denouncing his work as “political propaganda” and accusing him of aligning himself with “the Bush camp and apologists for current Israeli policy.” Unfortunately, these attacks undoubtedly had some effect because it has taken five years for the work to become available in English. What Küntzel’s critics did not—and could not—dispute, however, was the author’s historical findings, a point noted by one of the book’s first defenders, the Syrian-born Muslim scholar Bassim Tibi, professor of international relations at the University of Göttingen and A. D. White

Professor-at-Large at Cornell University, who hailed it as “a most welcome contribution to understanding this subject” because of its “well-grounded analysis.”

Jihad and Jew-Hatred exhaustively documents the pre-World War II links between European totalitarianism and *both* nationalists and Islamists in the Arab world. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood not only received subsidies from the German legation in Cairo, paid through the German News Agency, to distribute translations of *Mein Kampf*, but its founder, Hassan al-Banna, “collaborated with the Third Reich’s Egyptian agents and at the start of 1941 conferred with the leadership of Young Egypt over a plan to launch an anti-British uprising . . . to support the German war effort against Britain.” In Syria Antun Sandeh’s Syrian People’s party imitated the Nazis down to their swastika like flag and open-handed salutes. In Iraq, the government organized a youth organization that the prime minister himself stated was designed to educate “Iraqi youth in the military spirit in the German fashion.” A delegation from this *Futuwwa* organization even attended the Nazis’s 1938 Nuremberg rally and marched alongside the Hitler Youth.

The book definitively dispels the myth that Arab/Muslim anti-Semitism is purely a consequence of the current Middle East conflict with its recounting of the career of Amin al-Husseini, the British-appointed grand mufti of Jerusalem. Although al-Husseini’s treacherous wartime support for the Nazi cause (including a 1941 failed pro-German *putsch* in Baghdad) and his role in organizing the Bosnian SS division are relatively well known, Küntzel reveals that the origins of the mufti’s affinities ran much deeper: “Even if in the 1930s some Arab nationalists saw Germany as an ally against the British without taking a great interest in the nature of the Hitler regime, the Mufti knew what that nature was and was attracted by it for that very reason.” The first anti-Jewish riots incited by the future mufti and resulting in deaths took place in 1920. In 1929, after he

was comfortably ensconced as the highest religious authority in the British Mandate of Palestine, al-Husseini led a pogrom that resulted in the massacre of 116 Arab opponents of his policies and 133 Jews, the latter not Zionists but members of centuries-old communities of religious scholars in Safed and Hebron. Küntzel writes:

Al-Husseini tirelessly used [his] religious office to Islamize anti-Zionism and provide a religious rationale for the hatred of Jews. Anyone who failed to accept his guidelines would be denounced by name in the mosque during Friday prayers, excluded from rites of marriage and burial, or physically threatened. In declaring this anti-Jewish struggle a religious duty, the Mufti placed the Palestine conflict in a pan-Islamic context: his hatred of the Jews was also a declaration of war on the “invasion of liberal ideas” into the world of Islam.

In his speeches and writings, the mufti denounced the achievements, great (e.g., freedom of thought, women’s rights, and religious liberty) and small (e.g., cinemas, theaters, and magazines) of modernity as “customs and usages which are opposed to our religion and to our whole way of life” and blamed “the Jews” for this alleged corruption of moral values. “The Jews” soon became responsible for every *contrestemps* in al-Husseini’s life: the 1942 landing of Allied troops in North Africa proved to him that “the Americans are the willing slaves of the Jews” and “as such the enemies of Islam and the Arabs.” In discussing the mufti’s role in the postwar rebirth of Islamist militancy, Küntzel did not hesitate to take the West to task for failing to hold him to account for his collaboration with National Socialism:

Why was it then that, unlike all the other semi-fascist movements of

the 1930s, jihadism did not depart the stage of history after the defeat of the Nazis? . . . The answer has to do with the pro-Arab opportunism of the great powers after the war. All the victors of the Second World War contributed in one way or another to Amin al-Husseini’s rehabilitation. Let us begin with the Western allies: in France, the war criminal was allowed to live like an official guest. Britain meekly withdrew its extradition request in response to objections from the Arab League. After the Mufti’s flight to Egypt, the U.S.A., which had previously insisted on his punishment, let the matter drop as well.

It would be comforting if one could dismiss Amin al-Husseini as a historical curiosity of little import, but the Islamist movement Hamas has made his legacy its own. The Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has appropriated all prior anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Its 1988 founding charter, which has never been repudiated, cites the infamous anti-Semitic forgery, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as an authentic historical document and even blames the alleged Jewish authors for machinations that its tsarist creators stopped short of attributing to them: “Today it is Palestine, tomorrow it will be one country or another. The Zionist plan is limitless. After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying.”

In short, as it traces the intertwined paths that Islamism and anti-Semitism have taken since the 1948 establishment of Israel from the heyday of Arab nationalism under Nasser through the resurgence of Islamism in the 1970s to 9/11 and the war on terrorism,

Küntzel's book makes a powerful case that irrespective of whatever anger might be justifiably provoked by any specific Israeli (or American) action, it is not the particular instance of "escalation" that gives rise to anti-Semitism but a preexistent, virulent anti-Semitic ideology that repeatedly escalates the conflict. Küntzel adduces the example of Al Qaeda, whose leader, Osama bin Laden, has declared the United States nothing less than "the worst civilization witnessed by the history of mankind." Why? Because America is "the nation who, rather than ruling by the Sharia of Allah in its Constitution and Laws," is governed by human laws that permit "immoral acts of fornication, homosexuality, intoxicants, gambling, and trading with interest"—all vices that arise from machinations of "the Jews" who have "taken control of your economy, through which they have taken control of your media, and now control all aspects of your life making you their servants." In such a conspiracy-obsessed *Weltanschauung* Israel quickly becomes "really an American" outpost and the United States "really a Jewish" power—and both mythical constructs are better candidates for "root causes" of terrorism than the real social and political problems often exploited by the Islamists for their own ends.

Professor Hofstadter pessimistically concluded his study on paranoia in American politics by noting:

This glimpse across a long span of time emboldens me to make the conjecture—it is no more than that—that a mentality disposed to see the world in this way may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population. But certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of such psychic energies, and

to situations in which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties. In American experience ethnic and religious conflicts have plainly been a major focus for militant and suspicious minds of this sort, but class conflicts also can mobilize such energies. Perhaps the central situation conducive to the diffusion of the paranoid tendency is a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise. The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular social interest—perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of its demands—are shut out of the political process. Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed. They see only the consequences of power—and this through distorting lenses—and have no chance to observe its actual machinery. A distinguished historian has said that one of the most valuable things about history is that it teaches us how things do *not* happen. It is precisely this kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop. He has a special resistance of his own, of course, to developing such awareness, but circumstances often deprive him of exposure to events that might enlighten him—and in any case he resists enlightenment.

Küntzel's *Jihad and Jew-Hatred* is a salutary reminder that policymakers and analysts alike would do well to discard any illusions they may have that, by themselves, the right mix of

political concessions negotiated by presumably rational statesmen will extinguish the fires of anti-Semitism that have been stoked for so long in certain quarters of the Arab–Muslim world. Only when the full implications of the ideological dimensions of Islamism, including its congenital anti-Semitism, are acknowledged and confronted can one even begin to sketch out a “road map for peace” that would be realistic in any meaningful way.

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The Islamist

by Ed Husain
 London: Penguin Books (2007),
 288 pages.

During the past six months, more than 300 Muslims have been arrested in 5 European countries and charged with involvement with terrorism. Most are young, often aged between 16 and 30. Almost all were born in Europe and hold the nationality of the European country in which they were plotting terrorist operations. European intelligence services claim that large numbers of young Muslims may have already stepped into the antechamber of terror. In Britain alone the number of young Muslims suspected of flirting with terror is put at more than 4,000.

What is happening? Why are these young European Muslims drawn to terror? What should Europe do to integrate them into its pluralist culture? All those pondering such questions would find Ed Husain’s autobiographical book, *The Islamist*, an interesting read.

It is not a work of academic scholarship or political analysis. It is one young man’s

personal story of how he was attracted by radical Islamist ideas at the age of 16 and how he spent more than 5 years of his life in a labyrinth of fanaticism, conspiracy, and terror. Husain’s book bears a subtitle that states his purpose in writing the book: *Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw, and Why I Left*.

Husain, who is of Bangladeshi origin, shows how Islam is used by some Britons of Asian background as the matrix of a peculiar form of identity politics. To Britons who face or at least fear racism because of the color of their skin, Islam becomes an invisible form of bonding. It is against that background that Husain, echoing the prevalent misunderstanding in Britain, speaks of “Muslims and whites” as if Islam were a form of racial identity.

Once Islam is adopted as a form of racial and ethnic self-expression rather than a religion with a universal appeal, the neo-Muslims of the Husain type begin to look for opportunities to highlight their Muslimness.

Husain’s involvement with radical politics in the name of Islam included many episodes of duplicity, intimidation, and even violence but stopped short of actual terrorism. Throughout those turbulent years, Husain’s parents, devout traditional Muslims, opposed his politics and even banished him from their home.

Husain shows how little he and his militant colleagues knew about Islam as a religion. Because they knew neither Arabic nor Persian, the two key languages of the Islamic civilization, they had no access to the immense literature of Islamic theology, philosophy, history, and jurisprudence. Instead, they had to rely on a small number of pamphlets written by the late Pakistani militant Abu al-Ala Maudoodi and a certain Sheikh Nahbani, an obscure Jordanian cleric who founded the Islamic Liberation party (Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami).

Husain relates how he decided to travel to Syria to learn Arabic and to see how a Muslim society works. After only a year in Damascus, however, he was disappointed. He found that

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