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The Origins and Ideology of Hamas

Why were the victims of October 7 killed? Were they killed as a reaction to oppression by Israel or because of their Jewishness? To answer this question, we need to understand the ideological concept of the murderers and its historical background. Hamas' 1988 Charter remains the most important source for this. When Hamas published a "Document of General Principles" in 2017, it emphasized that its 1988 Charter is still valid.

In the next few minutes, I would like to look at two historical sources that shaped this Charter: firstly, the jihad idea of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and secondly, the antisemitism of the Nazis.

Let me start with a quote from a well-known Palestinian politician, Sari Nusseibeh. He stated that the Hamas Charter of 1988 "sounds as if it came straight from the pages of *Der Stürmer*."¹ And he is right.

Not only are the atrocities of October 7 reminiscent of Nazi atrocities, but the ideological justifications for the murder of Jews in 1941 and the murder of Jews in October 2023 are similar, as Prof. Herf has just shown. But how can we explain the fact that we find echoes of Hitler's antisemitism in the Hamas Charter?

I would like to answer this question on the basis of new research findings. This research proves that National Socialism had a greater influence on the

¹ Sari Nusseibeh, *Once Upon A Country. A Palestinian Life*, Picador 2007, p. 282.

development of the Middle East conflict than previously assumed. In the first part of my paper, I would like to explain this influence of the Nazis by using three examples.

First of all, there was the cooperation between the Nazis and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Hamas presents itself as a "wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine" and draws a line in its Charter from the beginning of the Brotherhood's anti-Zionist jihad in the 1930s. At that time, however, with the explicit approval of Joseph Goebbels, meetings took place between Nazi agents in Egypt and the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, who also hated Jews and fought Zionism. The Germans transferred large sums of money to this Islamist group, organized joint "Palestine meetings" and joint educational events on the "Jewish question" and supported the Brotherhood's most important ally, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin el-Husseini. The Nazis wanted to radicalize the anti-Zionism of the Muslim Brotherhood and turn the territorial conflict over Palestine into an irreconcilable anti-Jewish religious war. This is why they published the pamphlet "Islam and the Jews" in 1938 and distributed it in large numbers and in several languages during the Second World War. "Islam and the Jews" is a shocking text that uses the religion of Islam solely to incite hatred of the Jews. In this way, Nazi propaganda "combined Islam with anti-Jewish agitation to an extent that had not hitherto been known in the modern Muslim world."²

Secondly, from 1939 on, the Nazis launched their radio propaganda in Arabic language in order to reach the illiterate masses. In this way, Goebbels' antisemitism resounded in the Arab world every evening between April 1939 and April 1945. Jeffrey Herf in his seminal study "Nazi-Propaganda for the Arab World", has shown how this six-year barrage of sound embedded European

² David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War*, Cambridge, MA 2014, 97.

antisemitism in the consciousness of the “Arab Street”. These broadcasts were well-done with excellent and famous speakers, carefully selected Arabic music and a very good sound quality. Its programs, of course, were rabble-rousing. Their aim was not to inform, but to incite the Muslims against the Brits and the Jews. According to contemporary sources, their anti-Jewish agitation was effective because the Nazis could build on the patterns of early Islamic anti-Judaism and they could instrumentalize the local conflict with the Zionists.

This brings me to my third and final point: the 1948 Arab war against the newly founded Israel – a war that Hamas proudly refers to in its Charter.

The Nazi radio in Arabic language had to cease operation in April 1945 but its frequencies of hatred remained virulent. Thus, the idea of thwarting a Jewish state at any cost lived on and found a new home in Egypt, where, after 1945, the Muslim Brotherhood built the world’s largest antisemitic movement. By 1948, its membership has risen to one million.

Today, hardly anyone knows how controversial the 1948 war was among Arab leaders. The Arab League unanimously opposed the two-state solution for Palestine advocated by the United Nations in November 1947. However, how to react to the United Nation’s decision was heavily disputed until the last minute: on several occasions the Arab League and Egypt in particular ruled out the possibility of an attack by regular Arab forces on the Jewish state.

They had good reasons for rejecting a regular war: Firstly, this Arab war was a massive violation of the United Nation's Charter. Secondly, it was an affront to the USA and the Soviet Union as well as to all progressive forces that had previously fought the Nazis. Thirdly, there was only a small minority of Palestinian Arabs who wanted this war. And fourthly, with the exception of the Arab Legion of Transjordan, the Arab armed forces were in a pitiful state.

Why did this “official war” against Israel nevertheless take place? My most recent book provides evidence that it was primarily pressure from the “Arab street” and the antisemitic campaigns of the Muslim Brotherhood that led the Arab rulers to overcome all their doubts and to attack Israel. The Brotherhood could draw on the lingering echoes of the antisemitic Nazi propaganda in which preventing the emergence of a Jewish state at any cost had been a constant theme. The Muslim Brotherhood’s propaganda was thus able to create an atmosphere in which war against the Jewish state seemed to be the only logical and natural course of action. They formed a nationalist mass movement that longed for the catharsis of a military confrontation and whipped up a tidal wave of public anger. In this feverish atmosphere, no Arab leader felt able to successfully resist the Brotherhood’s warmongering.

But the story doesn't end here: In retrospect, there is no doubt that those six years of daily Nazi radio propaganda marked a turning point that divided Middle Eastern history into a before and an after.

These years fostered an exclusively anti-Jewish reading of the Qur’an, as in the Hamas Charter of 1988. They popularized the European world-conspiracy myths, as in the Hamas Charter. They shaped a genocidal rhetoric towards Zionism, as in the Hamas Charter. It is thus no coincidence that Hamas speaks the language of the Nazis when it comes to Jews. And it is no coincidence that when Hamas first encountered unprotected Jews on October 7, it tortured and murdered them as only the Nazis had done before. We have to conclude that in terms of ideas, there is a Nazi connection to Hamas.

No wonder, then, that Israeli soldiers recently found in Gaza an Arabic translation of "Mein Kampf" and a book written by Mahmoud al-Zahar, a co-

founder of Hamas which "hails the Holocaust ... and calls for nations to follow what the Nazis have done."³

However, antisemitism is only one element of Hamas' ideology. In addition, article 8 of its Charter quotes the slogan of Hamas which is at the same time the motto that the Muslim Brotherhood chanted on the streets of Cairo back in the 1930s: "Allah is our goal, the Prophet our model, the Qur'an our constitution, jihad our path and death for the case for Allah the loftiest of our wishes."

But what does the slogan "*The Qur'an is our constitution*" mean? It means that Hamas wants a theocracy in which people do not decide on laws, but the Koran is the constitution, i.e. the supreme law. It is therefore also clear why Hamas hates Israel. Not primarily for what its government does, but for what it is: a self-determined democracy.

And what does the call "*Jihad is our path*" mean? It means that peace negotiations are not only rejected, but actively torpedoed. A peace with Israel that would benefit the Palestinians: This is the nightmare of the Hamas leadership, which wants Israel's destruction. It exploits the suffering of those living in Gaza instead of eliminating it in order to gain new recruits for its jihad.

And this is the final slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood and of Hamas: „*Death for the case for Allah is the loftiest of our wishes.*” According to the Qur'an, a martyr's death secures the person killed a privileged place in paradise. And since the Qur'an is known to always be right, this results in a win-win situation for jihadists: either they are the winners within this world or they die and enjoy the paradise of the afterlife.

³ President Isaac Herzog at Munich Security Conference presents antisemitic texts found in Gaza, 17 February 2024.

For Islamists, however, not only their own lives have no value, but also, as we are currently experiencing, the lives of other Muslims: they are abused and sacrificed en masse as human shields. Without these human shields, Hamas would be weak in the current war and probably already defeated. While in all other wars weapons are supposed to protect people, in the ongoing war it is people who are supposed to protect the weapons. The more Arab civilians are killed, the better for the Hamas propaganda that Israel is out to kill civilians, especially children. For Israel, this is a lose-lose situation: either it loses the rocket war because it cannot defend itself or it defends itself, kills civilians too and loses the propaganda war.

It is therefore not only hatred of Jews that determines Hamas' behavior, but also the Qur'an, the idea of jihad and martyrdom. It is a religious war and therefore an irreconcilable war that Hamas is waging against Israel, the Jews and its own population. Anyone who ignores the religious motive of Hamas will hardly be able to understand the inner logic of its behavior.

In the Charter of Hamas, both components – Jihad and Jew-Hatred – come together and mutually reinforce one another. European antisemitism is radicalized through connection with the fanatical aspects of Islam. At the same time, the traditional image of the *dhimmi-Jew* derived from the Qur'an has gained a new eliminatory dimension through the admixture of world-conspiracy theories.

Many do not want to take note of this particularly aggressive antisemitism. They believe that Israel's policies are responsible for the 1,200 murders - in the hope that a different policy would eliminate this hatred of Jews. I think this is an illusion. It is wiser and safer to replace this avoidance of reality with an unflinching gaze at the historical lineages between Islamism and Nazism.
