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A Mosaic on the Mufti's Islam

Icon of Evil: Hitler's Mufti and the Rise of Radical Islam, by David G. Dalin and John F. Rothmann, New York: Random House, 2008, 230 pp.

Reviewed by

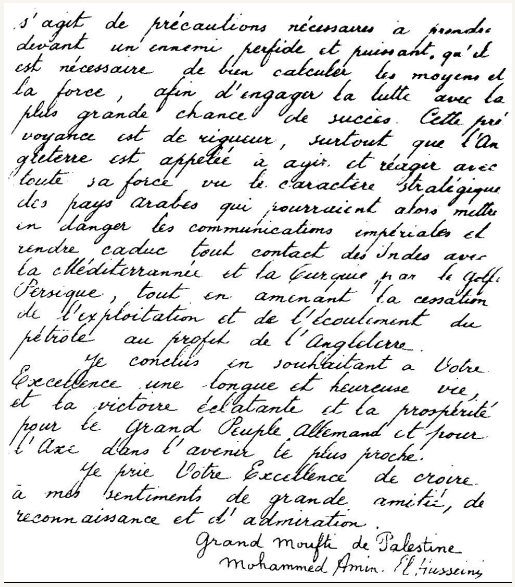
Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

In a kind of delirium he dreamed of the skyscrapers of New York going down in a blaze of fire. Collapsing towers illuminate the exploding city like gigantic torches. This is how the Nazi War Minister Albert Speer described one of Adolf Hitler's visions. This hellish scenario took place at the beginning of this millennium. Two American academics, David G. Dalin and John F. Rothmann, maintain in their book about Hitler's mufti and the rise of radical Islam that there is a continuity (141) in Islamist thought linking Amin al-Husaini with Ramzi al-Yusuf, the mastermind of the first assault on the Twin Towers of the World in Manhattan in 1993, and Usama Bin Ladin, the leader of al-Qaida, who in 2001 destroyed them.

Photo: W.G. Schwanitz

Hitler's vision: skyscrapers of New York going down in a blaze of fire

The authors take the reader on a journey into the last century to explain their thesis of historical continuity. They explore the life of Amin al-Husaini. We learn that he was born in 1895 to a prominent Jerusalem Arab family. During the First World War he served as an officer in the Ottoman army. Three years later the British High Commissioner of Palestine, Sir Herbert Samuel, bestowed on him the office of the Mufti of Jerusalem (later he would sign his letters with the title *al-Mufti al-Akbar Min Filastin*, the grand mufti of Palestine).



s'agit de précautions nécessaires à prendre devant un ennemi perfide et puissant. qu'il est nécessaire de bien calculer les moyens et la force, afin d'engager la lutte avec la plus grande chance de succès. Cette prévoyance est de rigueur, surtout que l'Angleterre est appelée à agir et réagir avec toute sa force vu le caractère stratégique des pays arabes qui pourraient alors mettre en danger les communications impériales et rendre caduc tout contact des Indes avec la Méditerranée et la Europe par le Golfe Persique, tout en amenant la cessation de l'exploitation et de l'écoulement du pétrole au profit de l'Angleterre.

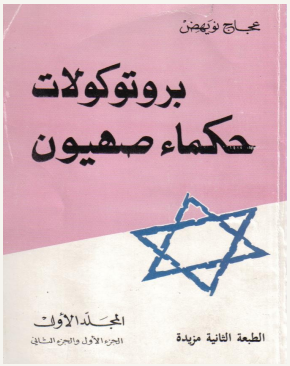
Je conclus en souhaitant à Votre Excellence une longue et heureuse vie, et la victoire éclatante et la prospérité pour le Grand Peuple Allemand et pour l'Axe dans l'avenir le plus proche.

Je prie Votre Excellence de croire à mes sentiments de grande amitié, de reconnaissance et d'admiration.

Grand Mufti de Palestine
Mohammed Amin. El Hussein

Baghdad, 20 January 1941: Last page of the Mufti's nine-page-letter to Adolf Hitler in French for close cooperation

Amin al-Husaini turned out to be ungrateful because, according to the authors, he did his best to block Samuel's pro-Zionist policy (and that of Great Britain) to establish a national Jewish home in Palestine. Similarly, Samuel is portrayed here as an appeaser. The grand mufti incited jihad, plots, and murder. During the First World War (111) he attained a copy of the forged work *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He believed in a "Jewish World conspiracy" and propagated this idea until his death in 1974.



Forged: Protocols of the Elders of Zion
Arabic version, Damascus 1990, Vol. I

Dalin and Rothmann also venture into counter-factual history: "What if the Nazis and the grand mufti had succeeded?" They ask whether the course of history would have taken a different turn if someone from the rival Nashashibi clan had been appointed to this post. They have no doubt that, in this case, Amin al-Husaini would have had his adversaries murdered. The authors say that the mufti was not the only one who went on an extreme path, but also the Arabs in Palestine.

Dalin and Rothmann describe a series of Arab-Jewish clashes which took place in the 1920s. When Jewish leaders challenged the status quo at the Western Wall, the residents "openly resisted" Jewish demands, "inspired by the demagoguery" of Amin al-Husaini and his fellow "Islamists."

The authors even lump the Egyptians Abd an-Nasir and Anwar as-Sadat together (35) in the same basket of future leaders of radical Islam. Saddam Husain, with his Bath party, is also depicted here as a "radical Islamic government" in the 1970s (88).

The reader can see that the authors take a decidedly one-sided approach. They are not able to explain properly why the Arabs in Palestine could not have watched the rise of Jewish immigration and construction of new settlements without opposition. For religious and nationalistic reasons their response was quite natural.

Unexplored: Amin al-Husaini's memoires of 1999

There are also questions on the other side of the coin that the authors fail to explain. What were the alternatives to Amin al-Husaini? Was he a born radical Islamist, as it appears here, or did he experience some kind of transformation? Why did he end up as the backer of Benito Mussolini's Fascists and Hitler's National Socialists? When did he cross the "red line"?

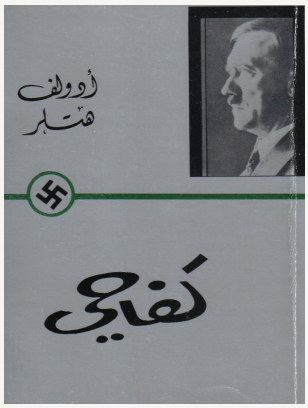
Was it with the mentioned *Protocols* in 1918? Could it have been in 1926 when *Mein Kampf* was first completely published? Or could it have been in 1933 when Hitler came to power and the mufti offered him his services (with the *Haavara*-Transfer agreement that allowed about sixty thousand German Jews to emigrate to Palestine, on the horizon)? Or could it have been in 1941, when he learned first-hand about the Holocaust in Europe, and Hitler explained to him his desire that the next chapter of the Holocaust should take place in the Middle East?

The authors found some revealing aspects of the opportunism of Amin al-Husaini. The *New York Times* quoted him saying in early 1937 that he fought British-supported Zionism in Palestine, and that he did not care who backed him "as long as it helps us to attain our goals."

As Dalin and Rothmann point out, this view was widely held. The reader might wonder why the Arabs had changed sides, as they expected to get some independent countries in compensation for their support of the Allies during the Great War. Or, could there have been, even before 1900, and all the more so during the Great War, a German-Ottoman axis for the *jihadization of Islam* in British Arabia and India, French North Africa, and Russian Asia?

The authors argue that Amin al-Husaini not only knew about the Holocaust but was directly involved. Dalin and Rothmann mention that the mufti spoke at the end of 1944 about eleven instead of seventeen million Jews; that he blocked the rescue of Jews from occupied Europe to Palestine; and that he recruited Muslims for Nazi military units, particularly in Bosnia.

However, they do not offer new evidence. Dalin and Rothmann base their study mainly on a narrow representation of the published English language literature, to the exclusion of scholarship and sources in Arabic, French, German, and Hebrew. They rarely consulted primary sources in the archives, even in English, and new documents have become available. One exception is the *Churchill War Papers* in London, and they deserve credit for having discovered some files in the Sir Martin Gilbert Collection.



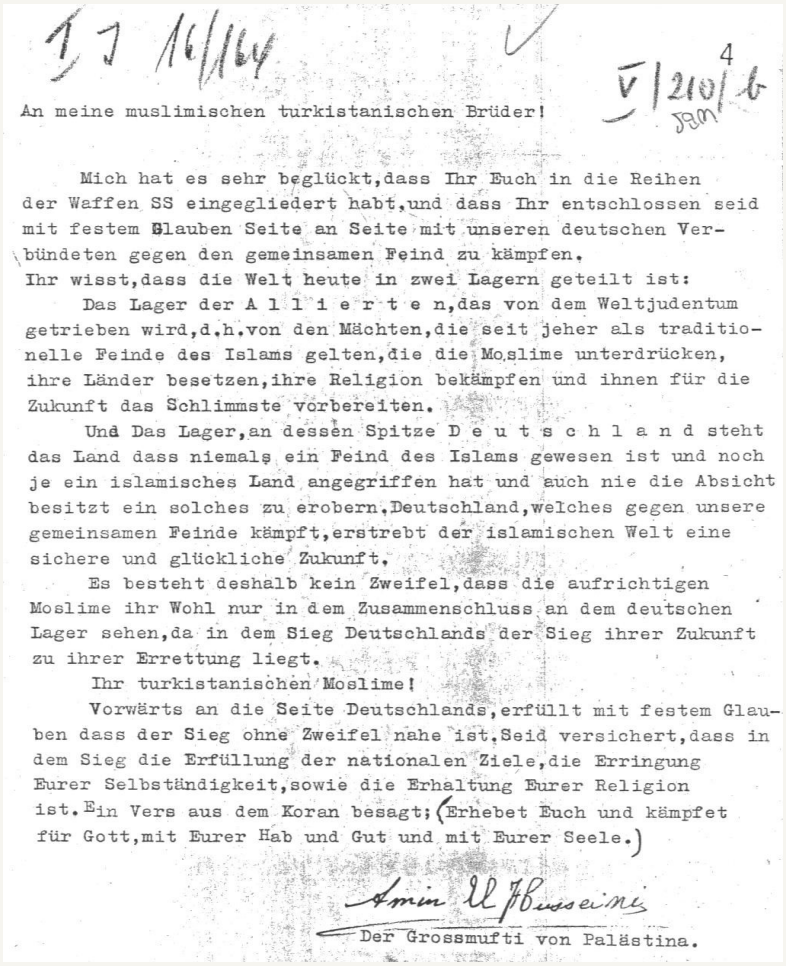
Kifahi or *Mein Kampf* : Tlas Publisher,
Damascus 1999, transl. by Luis al-Hajj

Several arguments are not anchored in fact, and some have been distorted. S not say anything about a "racial inferiority of the Muslims" (47). The mufti did not write a book titled *Islam and the Jews* (57). The booklet in question is *Islam - Judentum - Bolschewismus* (Islam, Jewry, Bolshevism).

Muhammad Sabri edited it in Berlin in 1938, and the publisher was Junker-Duennhaupt. It contained the mufti's 1937 appeal - some called it a *fatwa* - to the Islamic world. The Nazis reprinted this part as *Islam and Judentum* (Islam and Jewry), and distributed it to Muslim SS units in Bosnia, Croatia, and Russia.

Dalin and Rothmann do not offer new facts with regard to the mufti's "role in instigating and encouraging the Nazi plan of exterminating European Jewry" (63). This very heavy accusation should have been based on solid evidence.

At the start of the Second World War Hitler had no "plans to conquer North Africa and the Middle East." On the contrary, with the long tradition of a *secondary Middle Eastern policy* in Berlin, he readily conceded the region to London, Rome, Paris, and Moscow. He did not "postpone his invasion of Soviet Russia to transfer the bulk of his armed forces to support Rommel in Egypt" (68). It should be noted that General Rommel's expedition was an unplanned action to help the Italians. Hitler provided very limited forces. In Berlin, the *Islamic Central Institute* was founded on 18 December 1942. It did not exist in 1941 (4).



An meine muslimischen turkistanischen Brüder!

Mich hat es sehr beglückt, dass Ihr Euch in die Reihen der Waffen SS eingegliedert habt, und dass Ihr entschlossen seid mit festem Glauben Seite an Seite mit unseren deutschen Verbündeten gegen den gemeinsamen Feind zu kämpfen.

Ihr wisst, dass die Welt heute in zwei Lagern geteilt ist:

Das Lager der A l l i e r t e n, das von dem Weltjudentum getrieben wird, d.h. von den Mächten, die seit jeher als traditionelle Feinde des Islams gelten, die die Moslime unterdrücken, ihre Länder besetzen, ihre Religion bekämpfen und ihnen für die Zukunft das Schlimmste vorbereiten.

Und Das Lager, an dessen Spitze D e u t s c h l a n d steht das Land dass niemals ein Feind des Islams gewesen ist und noch je ein islamisches Land angegriffen hat und auch nie die Absicht besitzt ein solches zu erobern, Deutschland, welches gegen unsere gemeinsamen Feinde kämpft, erstrebt der islamischen Welt eine sichere und glückliche Zukunft.

Es besteht deshalb kein Zweifel, dass die aufrichtigen Moslime ihr Wohl nur in dem Zusammenschluss an dem deutschen Lager sehen, da in dem Sieg Deutschlands der Sieg ihrer Zukunft zu ihrer Errettung liegt.

Ihr turkistanischen Moslime!

Vorwärts an die Seite Deutschlands, erfüllt mit festem Glauben dass der Sieg ohne Zweifel nahe ist. Seid versichert, dass in dem Sieg die Erfüllung der nationalen Ziele, die Erringung Eurer Selbständigkeit, sowie die Erhaltung Eurer Religion ist. Ein Vers aus dem Koran besagt; (Erhebet Euch und kämpfet für Gott, mit Eurer Hab und Gut und mit Eurer Seele.)

Amin El Husseini

Der Grossmufti von Palästina.

At the end of 1944 the mufti calls his Turkestan brethren of Waffen SS to fight against the 'allied camp and the world jewry' for the German victory

The authors' claim that Amin al-Husaini had not been "ordained as a Muslim cleric" is not of material importance because there is no clergy, as such, in Sunni Islam, or ordination, as in the Catholic Church (8). An "Arabist" (17) is a scholarly profession. We have no solid facts for the assertion that the mufti "never went out without a bulletproof vest" (20).

The claim that the mufti got "ten containers with poison" to kill a quarter of a million people via the water system of Tel Aviv in exchange for the five Palestinian paratroopers in late 1944 (61) is not substantiated in British or German sources. If the authors can now show really hard proof, this would be a discovery, since the British police report of 1944 on file is very detailed. If such an attempt at chemical warfare turns out to be true, this would be an important piece of evidence as to how far the mufti was willing to go in causing, at the same time, the death of so many fellow Muslims living in the Tel Aviv area.

The mufti never boarded a plane after the Nazi's surrender on 8 May 1945 (65) because he left Germany to Switzerland much earlier; see his memoires in Arabic (Damascus 1999). Arafat would never "succeed the mufti as head of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1969" (105), since the mufti was not formally head of the P.L.O. (this was Yahya Hammuda, following Ahmad ash-Shuqairi), although the mufti did play a certain role in this arrangement in late 1968. Yasir Arafat did not "merge Fatah with P.L.O. in 1969." The word Fatah is not the Quranic word for "conquest." It is a reverse acronym of ***H**arakat at-**T**ahrir al-**F**ilastini*. The scholar's correct name is David Wurmser (147).

A 1943 book cover of Berlin: The Nazis styled Amin al-Husaini as 'the Arab Fuehrer'

In the ten attached documents there are some mistakes. For example, that Hitler stated to the mufti on 28 November 1941 that he would also turn against the power "which protects the Jews" in the Middle East and Great Britain, not as page 164 says "which produces the Jews." Also, that he would "ask one **non**-European nation after the other to solve its Jewish problem," not, as on page 160, "ask one European nation after the other." It would have been helpful if the authors would have marked the exact bibliographic data of these sources and translations.

David G. Dalin's und John F. Rothmann's main conclusion can only be underscored: the grand mufti Amin al-Husaini linked the old fascism with the new National Socialism, as well as the Middle Eastern hatred of Jews with the European racist anti-Semitism of the Nazis, creating a new ideology. However, this book represents a missed opportunity to allow the reader to develop a fair and balanced perspective about continuities and discontinuities with regard to Hitler's hellish dream of the burning Manhattan, the grand mufti, the Holocaust, the recent torching of the Twin Towers, and the great loss of life which followed.

Dr. 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*.