

The Second Era of Underestimation:  
 Hamas and Its Ideology Before and Since October 7, 2023

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In this series of three webinars, in the traditions of a research institute such as YIVO, we seek to bring scholarship about the origins and ideology of Hamas to the attention of a broader audience. Even since the aggression of October 7, the major newspapers and media have done far too little to bring its ideological core to the attention of a mass audience. The short-term purpose of the attack was to derail the prospect of closer relations with Israel with other Arab states in the Abraham Accords and, as in the past, prevent a compromise solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our goal is to draw attention to the longer-term causes which, we believe, lie in the ideological convictions of the founders of Hamas. We also hope to challenge the polarization of our intellectual life that leads far too few scholars to examine antisemitism in its right-wing, neo-Nazi forms, but also in its leftist and Islamist variations. In that sense, this webinar series is a liberal project.

Hamas is in the tradition of what historians call “Islamism,” that is, a particular interpretation of the religion of Islam that emerged in the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1920s. In September 1937, Haj Amin al-Husseini, appointed in the 1920s by the British to be the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, was a man on the run because the British authorities were seeking to arrest him for his role in supporting terrorist attacks against the Jews in British Mandate Palestine. In his absence, he had a text read at a conference in Bludan Syria. In 1938, the speech, “Islam and the Jews” was published in German translation in Berlin. Husseini interpreted the Koran and the biography of Mohammed to mean that “the battle between Jews and Islam began when Mohammed fled from Mecca to Medina...In those days, the Jewish methods were exactly the same” as in the twentieth century. Then “they tried to annihilate the Muslims. Just as the Jews were able to betray Mohammed, so they will betray the Muslims today...The verses of the Koran and the Hadith assert that the Jews were Islam’s most bitter enemy and moreover try to destroy it.”<sup>1</sup> In “Islam and the Jews,” Husseini argued that the Zionist project was only the most recent of seven centuries of Jewish attacks on the religion of Islam, and that therefore the effort to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine was a religious obligation of all Muslims. His “Islamist”

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<sup>1</sup> Haj Amin el-Husseini, “Islam-Judentum: Aufruf des Großmufti an die islamische Welt im Jahre 1937,” in Mohammed Sabry, *Islam-Judentum-Bolschewismus* (Berlin: Junker und Dunnhaupt, 1938), 22-32.

interpretation of the religion of Islam presented it as one inherently hostile to the religion of Judaism, the Jews as a people, and therefore to the Zionist project in Palestine.

Husseini avoided British capture and found asylum in Nazi Berlin in November 1941. He met Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, and then Hitler himself. The photo of the two was published around the world. Husseini arrived with an entourage, including the talented radio announcer Younis Bahri. My study, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* drew on German archives, and the translations done by American diplomats in Cairo to offer the fullest account of the four years of anti-Jewish hatred in Nazi Germany's Arabic language broadcasts. Occasionally, Husseini spoke in his own name, as he did on December 23, 1942, in an address at the Opening of the Islamic Institute in Berlin. He combined the themes of *Islam and the Jews* with the conspiracy theories of Nazi propaganda. He said that "the Jews have spread their influence over Britain. They dominate America. The Jews are behind destructive and atheist communism. They have brought people against each other and the catastrophes and tragedies which are happening now are caused by the Jews. The first enemies of the Moslems are today the Jews and the British and Americans who support them."<sup>2</sup>

During the Holocaust, Hitler said the Jews intended to exterminate the Germans and that Germany would retaliate by exterminating the Jews instead. Husseini and others participating in the Nazi Arabic propaganda added another element to the Jews' plans. On November 3, 1943, the Voice of Free Arabism in Berlin program was entitled "Palestine between the Bolsheviks and the Jews." It asserted that "the Jews," especially in Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union, "kindled this war in the interests of

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World*, 153. Also, see Alexander Kirk to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, "The Grand Mufti's Speech," December 23, 1942, Cairo Embassy General Records, U.S. National Archives, College Park.

Zionism...The world will never be at peace until the Jewish race is exterminated. Otherwise, wars will always exist. The Jews are the germs which have caused all the trouble in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

By January and February 1944, much to the displeasure of officials in the Pentagon, Senators and members of the House of Representatives introduced resolutions in support of the creation of “a Jewish commonwealth” in Palestine. In response, Husseini said the following in a broadcast in March 1944. “[The] Wicked American intentions toward the Arabs are now clearer, and there remain no doubts that they are endeavoring to establish a Jewish empire in the Arab world. More than 400,000,000 million Arabs oppose this criminal American involvement...Arabs! *Rise as one and fight for your sacred rights. Kill the Jews wherever you find them. This pleases God, history and religion. This serves your honor. God is with you.* (emphasis in original),”<sup>4</sup>

Already in the last year of World War II, Brooklyn Congressman Emmanuel Celler urged that Husseini and other foreign collaborators with the Nazis be included among those to be indicted in war crimes trials that were then in the planning. American Zionists and their liberal and left-leaning supporters in the press and politics engaged in an unsuccessful effort to bring Husseini to trial. Without success, they urged the French government, which held him under house arrest from May 1945 to June 1946, to extradite him to Britain or to a war crimes trial. In the process, they produced a remarkable amount of material regarding his wartime collaboration with Nazi Germany, certainly enough to justify an indictment. Nevertheless, as the files of the French Foreign Ministry make clear, the French government decided that sending Husseini to be tried for war crimes would damage French interests in North Africa and the Middle East. His house arrest at a villa outside Paris was so lenient that in June 1946 he was able

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Jeffrey Herf, *Three Faces of Antisemitism*, 52; and in “Axis Broadcasts in Arabic,” U.S. Ambassador Alexander Kirk to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, November 19, 1943, Cairo Embassy General Records, U.S. National Archives, College Park.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion in Jeffrey Herf, *Three Faces of Antisemitism*, 55.

to escape in disguise and fly to Cairo. The government of Egypt granted him asylum and provided a security detail around his residence. He was among those Nazi collaborators who also benefited from the arguments of the early Cold War that the Nazi past should be put in the past in order to focus of the communist threat.

Husseini received a hero's welcome in Cairo. His most enthusiastic admirer was Hassan al-Banna, founder, and leader of the Moslem Brotherhood. On June 11, 1946, Al-Banna issued the following statement:

“...The hearts of the Arabs palpitated with joy at hearing that the Mufti has succeeded in reaching an Arab country...What a hero, what a miracle of a man...**Yes, this hero who challenged an empire and fought Zionism, with the help of Hitler and Germany. German and Hitler are gone but Amin El-Husseini will continue the struggle.** The Lord Almighty did not preserve Amin for nothing. There must be a divine purpose behind the preservation of the life of this man, namely, the defeat of Zionism.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Banna's remarkable statement made clear that Husseini would “continue the struggle” against the Jews, and that now this “struggle” was “the defeat of Zionism.” Indeed, Husseini did exactly that as he reemerged as the leader of the Palestine Arabs, rejected the UN Partition Resolution, and began a civil war that the Arab states escalated when they invaded the new state of Israel in May 1948.

From 1948 to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979-80, Islamist organizations faded into the political background. Their support for Nazi Germany and their religiously grounded hatred of Judaism the Jews, and therefore of the state of Israel were disqualifying features in a postwar world with fresh memories of the horrors of Nazism. During the crucial years of 1947-1948, the

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Herf, *Three Faces of Antisemitism*; and “Contents of Secret Bulletin of Al Ikhwan al Muslimin dated 11 June 1946, “ Cairo (July 23, 1946), Office of Strategic Services to Washington, National Archives, College Park

diplomatic and military support by the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc was crucial for the establishment of the state of Israel. However, once it became clear to Stalin that the new state of Israel was not going to be an instrument of Soviet expansion in the Middle East, Stalin turned against Israel. Soviet propagandists repressed the history of Soviet support for the Zionist project and placed the global prestige of anti-fascism in the service of the campaign to delegitimize the state of Israel. In the process it succeeded in making the word “Zionist” a term of abuse and in turning the cause of “the Palestinians” represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization into a cause celebre of the radical left.

Islamic Resistance Movement or Hamas published its founding Covenant or Charter in 1988 in this climate of global antagonism to Israel, secular Arab leftist defeat, and the impact of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the resulting Islamic Republic of Iran. It is essential reading.<sup>6</sup>

The Charter was clear and blunt. It claimed to speak “in the name of the most merciful Allah.” It quoted “the Martyr, Imam Hassan al-Banna, of blessed memory” that “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.”<sup>7</sup> It stressed that “our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious.”<sup>8</sup> It declared that “by adopting Islam as its way of life, the Movement goes back to the time of the birth of the Islamic message, of the righteous ancestor, for Allah is its target, the Prophet is its example and the Koran is its constitution.”<sup>9</sup> It presented itself as an interpretation of the religion of Islam and evokes the spirit of the seventh century.

Its goal was “to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine” and by “Palestine” it is referring to what included all of the state of Israel.<sup>10</sup> It called obliteration of the state of Israel to be an Islamic religious obligation. “The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews

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<sup>6</sup> “The Hamas Covenant 1988: Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement,” (New Haven, CT: The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy: Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School , 2008): [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hamas.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp) ; For my analysis of the Charter see Jeffrey Herf, “The Ideology of Mass Murder: Hamas and the origins of the October 7<sup>th</sup> attacks,” *Quillette* (October 10, 2023): <https://quillette.com/2023/10/10/the-ideology-of-mass-murder/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

(killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees.”<sup>11</sup> It celebrated the destruction of Israel as part of an apocalyptic, murderous theodicy. Article Eleven reasserted that “the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf [property] Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered: it, or any part of it, should not be given up.”<sup>12</sup> Article Thirteen rejected international conferences or negotiations. “There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals, and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors.”<sup>13</sup> Jihad in this context meant the waging of war against Israel.

Though most of the Charter presented a specifically Islamist case for the destruction of Israel, Article Twenty-Two incorporated the secular antisemitic conspiracy theories of twentieth century Europe. It asserted that the Jews “with their money” controlled the world media, “were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there” and “were able to control imperialistic countries and instigate them to colonize many countries in order to enable them to exploit their resources and spread corruption there.” Article Twenty-Two combined the absurdities of the *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* with those of Nazi propaganda. The Jews were “behind World War I,” the Balfour Declaration, and the League of Nations. “They were behind World War II, through which they made huge financial gains by trading in armaments and paved the way for the establishment of their state.” They “instigated” “the United Nations and the Security Council to enable them to rule the world through them. There is no war going on anywhere, without having their finger in it.”<sup>14</sup> The idea that the Jews were the cause of World War II which then “paved the way” to the establishment of Israel recalled Nazi Germany’s Arabic language radio broadcasts that asserted, for example, that “the Jews kindled this war [World War II] in the interest of Zionism.”<sup>15</sup> With the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Article Twenty-Two, Hamas Charter, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> On November 3, 1943, the Voice of Free Palestine broadcasting on Nazi radio made that assertion in a broadcast entitled “Palestine between the Bolsheviks and the Jews,” cited in Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2009), 184.

publication of the Hamas Charter in 1988, the Nazi influences in the Hamas Charter of 1988 were now also visible to a scholarly and policy readership.

An important theme of Nazi Germany's Arabic language propaganda was that a Jewish state in Palestine would expand "from the Nile to the Euphrates." Article Thirty-Two stated: "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.'"<sup>16</sup>

The publication of the Hamas Charter met with a resounding lack of interest in the world media. On January 5, 1993, *The Washington Post* published five paragraphs from the thirty-six articles, and 9,000-words of the Hamas Charter.<sup>17</sup> The first mention of the Charter in the *New York Times* appeared on April 16, 2009 in a very fine 220 word letter to the editor by the late Israel political theorist, Shlomo Avineri on April 16, 2009.<sup>18</sup> In the years since, *The Times* has not published extensive sections of the Charter, nor has it offered its readers an article that fully presented its core arguments and language.

In 1998, in the *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Meir Litvak, of Tel Aviv University, published "The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict." I think it was the first scholarly article in English about the Charter. In 2003, in the aftermath of Al Qaeda's attacks of 9/11, ca ira, a small, left-leaning press in Germany published Matthias Küntzel's *Jihad und Judenhass: Über den neuen jüdischen Krieg* [Jihad and Jew-Hatred: On the New Anti-Jewish War].<sup>19</sup> As far as I know, Küntzel's was the first extended

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "For the Record: From the Hamas Charter," *The Washington Post* (January 5, 1993): <https://www.proquest.com/hnpwashingtonpost/docview/140807192/F5A6C967F78D4476PQ/2?accountid=14696&sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers>

<sup>18</sup> Shlomo Avineri, "What the Hamas Charter Says About Jews," Letter to the Editor, *New York Times* (April 16, 2009): <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/1030605830/79A0544CE19C481CPQ/1?accountid=14696&sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers>

<sup>19</sup> Matthias Küntzel, *Jihad und Judenhass: Über den neuen jüdischen Krieg* (Freiburg: ca ira Verlag, 2003).

public description of the Charter and its significance by any scholar in Europe or the United States. He described the Charter as “probably the most important programmatic document of contemporary Islamism.”<sup>20</sup> In 2008, the Charter was posted in English on the Avalon Project for Diplomacy, History and Law of the Yale Law School. It is a website regularly consulted by historians around the world doing research and teaching on among other things, on the Nuremberg war crimes trials.<sup>21</sup> In 2010, Litvak published “‘Martyrdom is Life’: Jihad and Martyrdom in the Ideology of Hamas” in the specialist journal, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.<sup>22</sup> In 2014, in the pages of *The American Interest* magazine, I published “Hamas Too-Little Known Fascist Charter” in which I presented its key assertions. The essay is reprinted in my recently published *Three Faces of Antisemitism: Right, Left, and Islamist*.<sup>23</sup> Judging from published articles, and attention in the major press and media, the Charter of 1988 aroused little interest among journalists, human rights organizations, most scholars focused on the Middle East, or even Jewish, and Israel studies. The lack of attention in the academy to the Charter’s Islamic dimension of Jew-hatred and hatred of Israel found a counterpart in the paucity of attention in public discussion. (Indeed, with the coining of the term “Islamophobia,” those who examined the topic risked being accused themselves of racism.)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 109. Küntzel referred to an English translation of the Charter that was then available at the following, now dead, internet link: [www.palestinecenter.org/cpap/documents/charter.html](http://www.palestinecenter.org/cpap/documents/charter.html)

<sup>21</sup> “The Hamas Covenant 1988: Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement,” (New Haven, CT: The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy: Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, 2008): [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hamas.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp)

<sup>22</sup> Meir Litvak, “Martyrdom is Life”: *Jihad* and Martyrdom in the Ideology of Hamas,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 8 (July 2019), 716-734: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.494170>

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Herf, “Why They Fight: Hamas Too-Little Known Fascist Charter,” *The American Interest* (August 1, 2014): Hamas Charter,” *American Interest*, 2014: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/08/01/why-they-fight-hamas-too-little-known-fascist-charter/>; reprinted in Jeffrey Herf, *Three Faces of Antisemitism: Right, Left, and Islamist* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 203-210.

<sup>24</sup> On the role of the concept of Islamophobia is deflecting criticism of aspects of the religion of Islam, and of Islamism ideology, see Pascal Bruckner, *An Imaginary Racism: Islamophobia and Guilt* (Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: 2018); and Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2012).

In 2017, Hamas issued a statement that adopted the more secular language of anti-Zionism made famous by the Palestine Liberation Organization. Yet that text remained true to the spirit of the founding Charter. It was not a rejection or revision of the founding text. It rejected “any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea.”<sup>25</sup> In the same paragraph that included what became a famous chant, the authors inserted a phrase that convinced some journalists that Hamas had moderated its stance. It read, “however, without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus.” If the “Zionist entity” was rejected, “Palestinian rights” as Hamas defined them could not be “relinquished,” and the refugees had to be returned to “their homes from which they were expelled,” the state of Israel would have to be destroyed. “Resisting the occupation with all means and methods” was not a reference to Israeli policy on the West Bank but to the existence of all of Israel.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the statement of 2017 performed the magic trick of presenting this profoundly reactionary organization as a cause celebre of the global left.

Following its violent seizure of power in 2007, Hamas unified ideology with policy. It became not only a terrorist organization, but also a small dictatorship whose core purpose was to wage war against Israel. Its killed or jailed opponents, famously throwing some off the roofs of buildings, intimidated the press, controlled education, and imposed sharia law. It spent millions that could have been used to improve the lives of Gaza’s civilians on armaments, and on a stupendous construction project that built over 400 miles of tunnels designed for waging wars against Israel. With its combination of

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<sup>25</sup> “The Document in Full,” *Mideast Eye*, (May 2, 2017): <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full> . On this statement also see, Jeffrey Herf, “From the River to the Sea” *American Purpose* (November 20, 2023): <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/from-the-river-to-the-sea/>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

reactionary politics and enthusiasm for the most modern technology, Hamas recalls what I called “reactionary modernism.”<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

The ideological origins of the attack on October 7 were long-standing and public. We historians of the Nazi era refer to the problem of underestimation in the 1930s. Too few leaders and observers took Hitler’s threats to murder the Jews of Europe seriously enough. Similarly, the absurdities of the Hamas Charter of 1988 and its restatement of its determination to destroy Israel in 2017 were met, on the whole, with a second era of underestimation.<sup>28</sup> This second era of underestimation is less excusable in view of the lessons of the 1930s and 1940s. The cultural references, language, chants, costumes, and slogans differed but the war against the Jews continued unabated, this time with an explicitly religious justification. The road from Hussein’s *Islam and the Jews* in 1937, to the Hamas Charter of 1988, to the tunnel construction and then the attack of October 7 is long and winding, but the evidence of its existence is clear and compelling. There is also sound evidence that collaboration with Nazi Germany comprised an influential chapter in this underexamined history.

Yet we should also ponder the following. The Hamas Charter was written 43 years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. Scholars should be asking why the Jew-hatred of the 1930 and 1940s has been so persistent. Israel’s adversaries have long had a ready answer. The hatred persists because of Israeli injustice. The Jews, or Zionists, in other words, are yet again guilty. Today, I point to another, contrasting

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<sup>27</sup> Adam Goldman, Ronan Bergman, Patrick Kingsley and Gail Kaplowitz, “Israel Unearths Subterranean Fortress Under Gaza,” *New York Times* (January 16, 2024):

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/16/us/politics/israel-gaza-tunnels.html?searchResultPosition=6>

<sup>28</sup> From the large literature on the prophecy speech, see Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2006). The classic statement is by Karl Bracher, “The Role of Hitler: Perspectives of Interpretation,” in Walter Laqueur, ed. *Fascism: A Readers Guide* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 211-225; and his *The German Dictatorship*, trans. Jean Steinberg (New York: Praeger, 1970).

causal factor, namely the Islamist interpretation of the religion of Islam that emerged in the 1930s, and was evident in 1988, and on October 7. It, in my view, is the single most important cause of the terrible war taking place now.

The history of this strange but powerful Islamist ideology merits more scholarly and public attention now and in the coming months and years. In planning this series of webinars, we draw your attention to a body of scholarship and the work of historians of the past quarter century which offers a sound foundation and starting point for examining the ideas and politics which, yet again, were underestimated for far too long.

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