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Amin al-Husaini and the Third Reich

News from and about the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem

The global terrorist conflict since the millennium has nevertheless shed new light on the history of relations between Central Europe and the Middle East.

I will illustrate this here with updated articles on two books¹ on the subject. For the first time, I am including documents that leave little doubt about the involvement of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husaini, in the Holocaust: he became the central figure in German-Arab relations.

The British journalist Robert Fisk called the Arabs “blind to history” – the verdict of 25 years of journalistic work in the Middle East. The editors at the Berlin Center for Modern Orient write that wanting to examine Fisk's verdict was one starting point for their book. The other was the thesis that the myth of pro-fascist Arabs is based primarily on the historical collaboration of Arab politicians with Hitler and Mussolini. In this context, Arab attacks on Israel are seen as a continuation of the Holocaust, a natural consequence of the collaboration between Jerusalem Mufti Amin al-Husaini with the Nazis.

“Good Germans” – the formula was transferred from the Kaiser to Hitler

The ten authors from Israel, Morocco, and Germany want to counteract this tendency to instrumentalize history: they reflect on how Arabs perceived the Third Reich and how the topic affects current conflicts. Jamaa Baida describes how Nazi propaganda was received in Morocco. The formula of the “good Germans”, who had no colonies there nor aspired to any, was transferred from Kaiser Wilhelm II to Hitler at that time. This led to a temporary unity of interests: Some Moroccans believed that the Germans would help them limit Paris' influence, while the Nazis, on the other hand, sought to expand their power. Even then, however, a Moroccan newspaper warned that Berlin wanted to dominate weak peoples, that it was first targeting Jews and Christians, but would soon turn its attention to Muslims as well.

As Israel Gershoni explains, Arabs had the impression that Western democracies were in decline, especially since Hitler came to power. Since young states from the ancient cultures of the Middle East were also in a critical situation, local Nazi groups gained popularity, especially among young people. In Cairo, the “Young Egypt” association was founded in 1933 under Ahmed Husain. Contrary to the previous assessment that the association was as racist as its German role model, the Israeli author emphasizes that it was not only not anti-Semitic, but also rejected the Nazis' racial doctrine.

However, Gershoni bases his view on reports in secular newspapers such as “Al-Hilal”. But these once represented the left-wing and liberal spectrum. In addition, there were certainly more influential movements on the Nile in favor of collaboration with the Nazis, as reported by leaders such as Abd an-Nasir and Anwar as-Sadat. They put their faith in Hitler and accepted his ideology and actions, just to drive the British out of their country.²

Peter Wien proves in his article that Iraq also adapted quite a few pro-fascist ideas from Berlin and Rome. He traces this back to Rashid Ali's coup in 1941 and explores three

biographies with the help of memoirs – but without exploring the problems associated with these sources. They follow the deceptive memory and the tendency to embellish the past. Unfortunately, Wien does not close the circle on Rashid Ali's connection with the Nazis. It remains unclear how Nazi-like structures in Iraq or Ali's military pact with Berlin developed later.

René Wildangel takes issue with the “Muftization” of history in Palestine: Much is derived from the example of Jerusalem Mufti Amin al-Husaini, who, however, had not been in Palestine since 1937 and had almost completely lost his contacts there during the World War. That is certainly true, but the core statement remains false. There is enough material on this in the archives. It is noticeable that the authors sometimes lose their critical distance – as if, for example, the aim were to clear the Grand Mufti of the accusations. But in his hatred of Jews, he made a pact with the devil and does not deserve to be de-demonized: In fact, he was blind to the humanistic side of history.

Himmler to the Grand Mufti in 1943: “In three years, the atomic bomb will secure our final victory”

In the meantime, new information has come to light. These memoirs of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem – see book cover below – were published by Abd al-Karim al-Umar in Damascus in 1999. In them, the Grand Mufti candidly reveals his close relationship with SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. According to the memoirs, he often met with him for tea. During these meetings, the Nazi confided some secrets of the German Reich to him. In mid-1943, he explained that nuclear research was well advanced: in three years, there would be a nuclear weapon that would secure final victory. The Grand Mufti then describes the status and problems of this atomic research by the Nazis.

As it turned out, this was not entirely incorrect. Himmler presumably confided all this to the Grand Mufti on July 4, 1943: the date on the photo of the two with his dedication to his “Eminence, the Grand Mufti” – see below.

The Grand Mufti hears from Himmler in 1943: “About three million Jews eliminated so far”

Contrary to the clear evidence, some German authors such as René Wildangel recently claimed that it remains unclear whether and to what extent Amin al-Husaini was informed about the Nazis' policy of extermination.³ John Rosenthal argued similarly: the fact that the Grand Mufti's companions visited the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1942 does not necessarily mean that he knew what was happening there or in similar facilities in the East.⁴ However, in the aforementioned memoirs, the Grand Mufti himself described what Himmler told him in the summer of 1943. After several tirades about the “war guilt of the Jews”, Himmler also explained to him (Arabic excerpt below): “We have destroyed about three million of them so far.”⁵

After the war, Nazis such as Dieter Wisliceny incriminated Grand Mufti Amin al-Husaini

Amin al-Husaini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, remains a controversial figure. This begins with his title: “Grand Mufti”, which other muftis, or scholars of Islamic law, reject. Born in 1895 and deceased in 1974, the Palestinian often caused a stir. During World War I, as an Ottoman officer, he took up the German idea of organizing jihad and terror in the enemy's

rear. He then led the resistance against the British Mandate in Palestine during the uprisings of 1929 and 1936. He vehemently opposed Jewish settlement. Above all, however – and this discredited him in the eyes of many observers, not only Jewish ones – he had close ties to Nazi Germany.

From 1940 to 1945, he lived mostly in Berlin as a guest of the government. The Nazis provided offices, cars, and money so that the Mufti and his entourage could remain active. In return, he pulled strings in the Middle East and recruited Muslims under the swastika. On German radio for the Middle East, he propagated holy war against the Allies and Jews. Although his memoirs and three biographies about him have been published, the disputes about Amin al-Husaini continue. For some, he is a fascist lackey and Jew-hater, while others consider him a hero of the Arab national movement.

Others see his motives, but warn that he unreservedly served a murderous regime. Anyone who wants to know more should consult the collection of documents published by the Berlin Arabist Gerhard Höpp. These are the letters, memoranda, and public statements of the Mufti from his exile in Germany. In the introduction, Höpp explains his dilemma: since the Middle East conflict exists and has even escalated into war, the Mufti's life serves as an ideological weapon on both sides. He therefore hesitated for a long time before publishing these Mufti papers. Such doubts were dispelled by friends in Palestine and Israel: in a conflict in which parties were happy to use documents that suited them, the papers objectify the picture.

Calculations of the Nazis and the Mufti

What motivated the Nazis to court the Mufti? When Hitler believed himself to be at the height of his power, Berlin moved closer to the Middle East with the fall of France. Now its Middle East territories were within reach. On the other hand, England and neutral countries such as Turkey came under pressure. German admirals wanted to take the war to the Middle East. Although Hitler ordered something else at the end of 1940, namely the attack on the USSR, he planned to fight British positions in the Orient afterwards.

To do so, however, he needed Arab supporters such as the Mufti. Amin al-Husseini explained this in a letter to Hitler in early 1941. England was the real enemy. Under the guise of false humanity, it was pursuing imperialist goals, disguised with the lies of democracy and internationalism. In reality, it was all about oil and British India. Moreover, London had betrayed the Arabs: first, it had secretly divided the Middle East with Paris. Then Great Britain promised the Arabs that it would reward their fight against the Ottomans in World War I with independence. This was thwarted by the League of Nations' mandate regime. In addition, the British had directed Jewish settlement in Palestine. Later, the Mufti also praised "Hitler's fight against Bolshevism": if the Germans were victorious, the Muslims in the Russian Empire would be liberated.

Hitler's Grand Mufti, Greater Arabia, and the Holocaust

As German troops advanced toward the Suez Canal and the slopes of the Caucasus, it seemed that the Middle East was about to be opened up by this pincer movement. Then

Hitler received the Grand Mufti at the end of 1941. The latter offered him an Arab Legion to fight against the British, Jews, and Communists and requested a promise of independence in return. Hitler, in turn, said that after the destruction of the "Jewish-Communist Reich" in Europe, the hour of Arab liberation would strike. After that, the German goal would be "merely the destruction of Judaism living in the Arab world".

The Mufti would then be the best spokesman for the Arabs and could launch the Arab action he had secretly prepared. Amin al-Husaini envisioned a pro-German Greater Arabia that would abolish Jewish immigration. He not only opposed Zionism in Palestine. More than that, he hated Jews per se. As can be read here, he used verses from the Koran to support his cause. He was not squeamish in his choice of means. For example, he repeatedly proposed bombing Zionist meetings in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Since he frequently interacted with the leadership of the Reich, it can be assumed that he was aware of the Holocaust.

His papers testify to the unusual breadth of his writings and activities. Gerhard Höpp has compiled the texts and provided a careful introduction. They are intended to sober up the dispute about the Mufti and expose the roots of today's conflicts.

Dieter Wisliceny in 1946 on Amin al-Husaini and the Holocaust

The Grand Mufti was close associates with SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. Himmler's assistant Adolf Eichmann explained "the solution to the European Jewish question" to the Mufti in his card room at the turn of 1942. This was testified by Eichmann's colleague Dieter Wisliceny in 1946. In addition, an envoy of the Mufti (and three of the former Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Kailani) visited the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Berlin-Oranienburg in mid-1942, where, according to Grobbas' report, "Jews had aroused the interest of the Arabs".

Here, Dieter Wisliceny's statement about the Grand Mufti is reproduced for the first time and commented on by me. This is the handwritten statement by Adolf Eichmann's colleague, SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny, in Nuremberg in 1946, about the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husaini. Wisliceny, born in 1911, was executed in Bratislava in early 1948.

The report on the above-mentioned trip by Adolf Eichmann and Herbert Hagen to Palestine and Egypt, which also indicates Rome's temporary primacy in the Middle East, is documented in the literature.⁶ Of course, Eichmann and the Grand Mufti did not meet there in 1937, as David Meir-Levi claims.⁷ This is because the British did not grant Eichmann and Hagen entry visas to Palestine. Moreover, the Grand Mufti was in Syria at the time.

Nevertheless, Wisclieny shed light on the "intelligence connection between the Security Service" (SD [of the SS Reich Leader]) and the Grand Mufti since 1937, who had already approached the Nazis in 1933 in order to establish regular relations with them. After their trip to Egypt in 1937, Eichmann and Hagen described the Grand Mufti as "the religious leader of the Arabs" and head of the Arab High Committee in Damascus, which was directing the "wave of terror" of October 15, 1937, against the British (and Jews). The SS men proposed an intelligence network covering the entire Middle East: SD men with language skills were to act as assistants in the local agencies of the German News Bureau. They drew

on the model that diplomat Max von Oppenheim had developed with his intelligence office for the Orient as early as 1914.

According to Dieter Wisliceny, Adolf Eichmann gave Grand Mufti Amin al-Husaini a detailed presentation in his Berlin "map room" – "where he had collected statistical representations of the Jewish population of various European countries" – gave a detailed lecture on "the solution to the European Jewish question" at the turn of 1942. The Grand Mufti was allegedly "very impressed" by this. He had already asked Himmler – and received his approval – that after victory, one of Eichmann's representatives would come to Jerusalem as a personal advisor to the Grand Mufti: if the Grand Mufti then resolved the "Jewish question in the Middle East" – entirely in line with what he had long been proclaiming in his speeches on German Middle East Radio; and as is also documented in the aforementioned book "Mufti Papers".

In his memoirs, the Grand Mufti played the astonished, but highlighted his close relationship with Heinrich Himmler. He often met him for tea. The SS Reichsführer told him in the summer of 1943 that he had "exterminated about three million Jews so far". Himmler also asked him how the Grand Mufti intended to solve the Jewish question in his country. Amin al-Husaini replied that they should go back to where they came from. Himmler then said, "Back to Germany? We will never allow that." Here, Amin al-Husaini embellishes the story, because on November 2, 1943, he had openly declared in Berlin that Muslims should follow the Germans, who had found a "final solution to the Jewish question".

Dieter Wisliceny also emphasized here that Eichmann, Himmler, and the Grand Mufti had been impressed by each other. According to Eichmann, the Grand Mufti had also exerted "influence in Arab-Jewish matters" on Himmler. All three had spoken to each other frequently. Eichmann, on the other hand, admitted during his trial in Jerusalem in 1961 that he had only met the Grand Mufti once at a reception.

Conversely, the Grand Mufti did not mention Eichmann in his memoirs. Instead, he continued to admire Adolf Hitler, who received him in Berlin on November 28, 1941, as well as Heinrich Himmler, even after 1945.

In his statement, Dieter Wisliceny wanted to present himself in a better light. He claimed to have rejected Eichmann's offer to become Himmler's representative and personal advisor to the Grand Mufti in Jerusalem [Eichmann had already recommended him as "Jewish representative" for Bratislava in 1940 and Thessaloniki in 1943, where he was also responsible for the deportation of Slovak, Greek, and Hungarian Jews until mid-1944; therefore, Jerusalem was only natural as his next stop]: he had fundamentally rejected such "Oriental adventures". Suddenly fundamentally? This seems rather implausible here.

Moreover, Wisliceny noted that at the end of 1942 he had tried to persuade Eichmann and Himmler to prevent the "extermination of European Jewry". He mentioned the project to exchange 10'000 Jewish children from Poland for German civilian internees via the International Red Cross. The children were to travel to Palestine via Romania. They would have arrived in Theresienstadt on Eichmann's orders and with Himmler's approval. The Grand Mufti learned of this "through his intelligence service in Palestine" and protested vehemently to Himmler, as Eichmann told Wisliceny, who was summoned to Berlin for this reason. Himmler then canceled this action. In the future, he prohibited the emigration of

Jews from occupied Europe to Palestine. According to Wisliceny, this was the only country that could accept Jewish women and children in large numbers.

The Mufti also had a liaison officer from the Security Police [Hans-Joachim Weise] when he was in Germany [1941–1945]. In his memoirs, the Mufti confirmed that he had blocked the transfer of European Jews to Palestine.

Dieter Wisliceny and Amin al-Husaini: a preliminary conclusion

From all this, the following interim conclusion can be drawn: Amin al-Husaini, Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, was Adolf Hitler's Arab ally. He was privy to the Holocaust and participated in it in word and deed.

According to the speech, by mixing religious and racist hatred of Jews, preaching jihad against the Allies, and mercilessly persecuting Jews. And this despite his undoubtedly detailed knowledge of the Holocaust – one need only think of his companions' visit to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1942 – as well as its overall outcome – he himself mentions the figure of “three million exterminated Jews” communicated to him by Himmler in the summer of 1943.

In fact, he also placed himself fully at the service of Berlin and recruited Muslims under the swastika. Had the Nazis been victorious, he would have become, as an Arab leader, their willing executor of the Holocaust in the Middle East that Hitler had indicated to him for the Middle East.

There is much to suggest that Dieter Wisliceny would have become, in this case, Himmler's representative and personal advisor to the Grand Mufti in Jerusalem. The German mass murder of Jews in Europe during the World War was by no means solely "a matter for the West", but also for the Grand Mufti and like-minded Arabs such as Iraq's former Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Kailani. As the Grand Mufti's memoirs reveal, both knew this. Nevertheless, they concluded their pact with the Nazis in Berlin and even influenced their course in Europe and the Middle East.

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¹ Wolfgang G. Schwanitz: Arabs and the Third Reich. In: Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin, January 3, 2005, p. 7 (via Gerhard Höpp, Peter Wien, René Wildangel: Blind to History? Arab Encounters with National Socialism. Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin 2004, 377 pp.); Wolfgang G. Schwanitz: Bombs on the Zionists. In: Berliner Zeitung, 08.04.2002, p. 14 (on Gerhard Höpp: Mufti Papers. Letters, memoranda, speeches, and appeals by Amin al-Husseini from exile, 1940–1945. Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin 2002. 244 pp).

² Anwar Sadat: Rommel at al-Alamain (1942). In: Bernard Lewis: A Middle East Mosaic. Random House, New York, pp. 314–316.

³ René Wildangel: Between the Axis and the Mandate Power: Palestine and National Socialism. Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin 2007, p. 348.

⁴ John Rosenthal: The Mufti and the Holocaust. In: Policy Review, April–May 2008 (review of Gensicke's book *Der Mufti von Jerusalem und die Nationalsozialisten*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2007)

⁵ Abd al-Karim Umar: Muzakkirat al-Hagg Muhammad Amin al-Husaini. (The Memoirs of al-Hagg Muhammad Amin al-Husaini). Al-Ahali, Damascus 1999, p. 126.

⁶ Burchard Brentjes: Geheimoperation Nahost. Verlag das Neue Berlin, Berlin 2001, pp. 21–78. An English version of Dieter Wisliceny's 1946 handwritten statement can be found in: State of Israel, Ministry of Justice (ed.): The Eichmann Trial. Proceedings, Jerusalem 1962, Session 50, 244–45.

⁷ David Meir-Levi: History Upside Down. The Roots of Palestinian Fascism and the Myth of Israeli Aggression. Encounter Books, New York 2007, p. 9.

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