



## Setting the Record Straight: Hajj Amin and the Nazis

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Legacies of Hajj Amin al-Husseini's work are still with us. The broadcasts of Radio Zeissen, the Mufti's propaganda station, resonate in the 1988 Hamas covenant, and indeed still reverberate throughout our region. So do the recurrent references to Nazi imagery and texts in the Palestinian public domain. To demand a proper historical reckoning is therefore not to "demonize" the Palestinian people but to treat them, for a change, as adults capable of coping with a culture of responsibility.

Amidst the controversy and the invective, an opportunity has now arisen to set the record straight as to Hajj Amin al-Husseini and his role in Berlin. True, he was not the instigator of the extermination: and the record of his meeting with Hitler in November 1941 does not support Prime Minister Netanyahu's colorful depiction of it. Hitler spoke of "Vernichtung" as early as January 1939, and his troops implemented it well before Wannsee. But it is equally misguided to depict the Grand Mufti as a marginal player, or to describe the effort to bring him to justice – dating back to 1946 - as yet another Zionist propaganda ploy. A broad body of evidence, including several significant contributions in recent years by German scholars, proves otherwise.

The leader of the Palestinian people – still venerated today, and his creed still followed by many - was a promoter, a planner and an indirect perpetrator in mass murder. The evidence for that rests on much more than Dieter Wisliceny's story. To dismiss or diminish his role is not only historically wrong: it is ultimately harmful to the prospect of clarity, and perhaps reconciliation, as to the origins of the conflict. It helps sustain a narrative of victimhood about 1948 which ignores the Palestinian leadership's overt

intentions, and the Mufti's role in bringing about the fate that befell his people.

In a discourse dominated by "narratives" – which are all too often veiled diatribes, wrapped carefully in subjective pseudo-historical interpretations – it is more important than ever to stay as close as possible to the actual historical record. Not everything is in the eyes of the beholder. Some things actually happened, were documented, and should serve as the necessary foundation for intelligent discussion. All the more so when the impact of the past is still very much with us, as is the case with Hajj Amin al-Husseini's activities in Nazi Germany from November 1941 onwards, as well as his earlier support for the Axis cause.

It is regrettable that Prime Minister Netanyahu chose to offer, in his speech to the 37th World Zionist Congress on October 20, a highly colorful but historically unfounded depiction of the Grand Mufti's audience with Hitler on November 28 1941. But it is equally tragic, even grotesque, that this is being used to ignore, once again, the broad body of evidence on Hajj Amin's complicity in Nazi policy. All too often, even in Israel, this aspect of history has been cast aside – making it easier for the Arab side to advance a version of history in which the Palestinians were the innocent victims of a Jewish onslaught.

The implications of this tendency to dismiss or at least diminish the Mufti's role (even in the new Yad va-Shem Museum, it is given a distinctly marginal place, certainly in comparison with its setting in the previous exhibit) are often overlooked. After all, Hajj Amin – unlike his fellow guest in Berlin, and later Tokyo, Chandra Boze, who broke with Gandhi and urged the Indian national movement to side with the Axis – was not a minor figure in the history of the Palestinian people: he was their predominant leader for more than a generation. His aggressive incitement as to Jewish designs on the Temple Mount still reverberates today; and his party's brutal repression of the more moderate Opposition (Mu'aradah) in the late 30's sealed off any prospect of a compromise based on partition, and set the stage for the tragedies which followed.

He was also unique in retaining his position of leadership after 1945, despite his well-known association with the Nazis. This sheds a distinct light on the circumstances of the war of 1948, and on the innate realization for the Jewish population and leadership, at the time, that this was in some ways the last great battle of World War Two: Jews, some of them survivors, defending themselves against a Palestinian leader (and soldiers, like Kawukji) who came

directly from the Nazi side. To say this is not to "attack" the Palestinians – it is simply to invite them to take a deeper look into their own history.

The Mufti's specific role in Berlin, therefore, needs to be addressed: and while any exhaustive study of the issue – based upon the impressive volume of recent well-documented studies, many of them by German scholars, from Matthias Kuntzel onwards – lies outside the scope of this paper, some points must be made. Indeed, the present debate should be seized upon as an opportunity for historical clarity.

It is certainly true that Hitler (and Himmler) needed no goading in matters of murder, and in his Reichstag speech on January 31, 1939 – long before he met the Mufti – the Führer openly warned that if Jewish conspiracies do bring about another war, the result would be the "Vernichtung der Judische Rasse in Europa". Wholesale slaughter was already practiced by the Einsatzgruppen attached to the invading forces in Poland in September 1939 and more systematically in the Soviet Union right from the beginning of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941. There is no record, moreover, of the purported exchange as depicted in Netanyahu's speech.

None of this, however, should be used to erase the detailed evidence of Husseini's complicity in the Holocaust – which contrary to some recent assertions, goes well beyond the claims made on this subject by Dieter Wisliceny as he awaited trial in Nuremberg (he was ultimately executed in Bratislava in 1948). One of the most extensive and documented studies of his actions, as well as of his ambitions and petty quarrels, during his time in Berlin can be found in a book privately published in Tel Aviv in 1996 by the former Yugoslav partisan Jennie Lebel (jailed by Tito after the war, she made Aliyah in 1954). She obtained, among multiple other sources, the indictments for war crimes which the post-war Yugoslav government prepared against the Mufti. The book, "Haj Amin and Berlin", deserves greater attention (and some better editing) than it received: it certainly serves to counter any claims about the minor role played by him – and other Arab collaborators with the Nazis – throughout these years of war and extermination.

In several respects, the Mufti was an active participant in the Nazi war against the Jews:

1. As a promoter of the idea of extermination, including – among many statements and speeches to this effect - his message to Mussolini in the summer of 1940, in which he claimed the "right" of the Arabs at large to solve the Jewish problem in their own lands in line with Axis practices in Europe. This was later translated into his active role in Iraq - where he was involved

not only in the Kailani coup but also in inciting for the "Farhud" (pogrom) of June 1941.

2. As a planner of further extermination, and specifically that of the Jewish population of the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine: specifically, through collaboration of his agents with Einsatzgruppe Egypten, under Walter Rauff (considered to be the initiator of mass killing by poison gas trucks; later charged with the destruction of Tunisian Jewry), which sat in Athens vainly awaiting Rommel's conquest of Egypt and of British Mandatory Palestine.

3. As the perpetrator – through the active mobilization of Balkan Muslims to three Waffen-SS divisions, including the "Hanjär" (dagger) Mountain Division – of war crimes for which he was later indicted by the Yugoslav government, and sought by the British authorities (the French, as part of a pattern of provocative actions designed to avenge what they saw as their humiliating removal from Syria by British intervention, let him escape after the war through their territory to Egypt, where King Faruq offered him asylum).

It is not some Zionist propagandists but two scholars of American Arab origin, Youssef and Basil Aboul-Enein, in their fascinating study of Axis and Allied intelligence operations during World War II, who offer the following succinct summary: "With his introduction to Himmler, [Hajj Amin] became actively involved in the grotesque campaign against European and Slavic Jews in the Final Solution."

The past will not go away. What makes this issue so acutely relevant today is not only the incitement over Jerusalem, which triggered the Prime Minister's outburst, but other legacies of the Mufti's work which are still with us. Any reading of the Hamas Covenant, for example – written in London in 1988 – and in particular Article 22, "explaining" all of modern history as a reflection of devilish Jewish designs, proves that the broadcasts of Radio Zeissen, the Mufti's propaganda station (with its relay station in Bari) continued to resonate almost fifty years later, and indeed still reverberate throughout our region. So do the recurrent references to Nazi imagery and texts in the Palestinian public domain.

To demand a proper historical reckoning is therefore not to "demonize" the Palestinian people but to treat them, for a change, as adults capable of coping with a culture of responsibility.

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