

Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East
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Barry Rubin & Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East, Yale University Press, 2014.

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Not long ago, Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu commented in a speech that Hitler was influenced by his ally, the Palestinian Grand Mufti, Amin al-Husaini, to murder rather than expel Europe's Jews. There was an immediate uproar that this statement was historically incorrect, and that by saying this, he was diminishing Hitler's role in the Holocaust. This book, written by two very solid scholars, have not only validated this assessment, but have provided documents, letters, and photographs hitherto not widely available.

Why should this matter? The Holocaust was a Nazi program, no matter what the inspiration for it. But it does matter in another way: it reveals something that has not been widely understood: the long-standing parallel developments during the 1920s and 30s of a murderous brand of fascism that allied the Nazis with the Muslim world. ISIS represents a genocidal cult modeled directly on Nazi practices.

The authors spell out their rationale:

"The story of Nazi Germany's involvement in the Middle East has hitherto largely been viewed as a dramatic tale of might-have-been that was nevertheless marginal to Middle East history and the course of World War II. In fact, however, this episode was central to the modern history of the Middle East and continues to reverberate many decades later given its profound effects on Arab nationalism, Islamism, and the course taken by the Palestinian Arab movement." [ix]

Massive quantities of both wartime and postwar documents (in translation from German and Arabic) have just been released by the US government. What they reveal is that Germany had a long-time Middle East policy dating to the 19th century, designed to vex the British and French, who had acquired empire before the Germans had even united into one country. They had a long-time project of fomenting Muslim jihad against Germany's rivals.

Newly awakened Muslims gave rise to radical nationalism and Islamism in their beginning of rebellion against their colonial masters, the British and French. Germany was a perfect ally since they shared common and parallel interests, including rabid hatred of Jews.

The rise of the Nazis after World War I paralleled fascist movements all over the world at that time. Dictatorships blossomed, all sharing the same disdain for democracy, votes for women, and tolerance for some ethnic diversity. The Muslim world, such as it was (ethnically divided), followed the same track. They adopted authoritarian rule in their newly minted countries, a religion frozen in the Middle Ages, and injured pride over their obvious backwardness.

The new Nazi party played on this commonality, and one charismatic figure who emerged in the Palestinian territory (still under British control) was a man of Circassian ancestry (blond and blue-eyed), claiming descent from the Prophet Mohammad, and through family pull, appointed as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

Hitler and the Grand Mufti became allies, an alliance ignored in history until now. They met several times and the Nazis protected him throughout the war, even though the jihad he promised never materialized. Husaini had little luck in organizing an Arab army, but he did better with the Muslims of the USSR, India, Afghanistan, and the Balkans, creating Muslim corps who assisted the Nazis in their holocaust.

Husaini was definitely a war criminal and was on Britain's list for trial and (hopefully) execution. The French, out of spite against the British, gave him refuge and released him to create decades of Islamist mayhem in the Middle East.

Some of the most shocking revelations in the book include the personal relationship between Hitler and Husaini (whom Hitler had pronounced an honorary Aryan). In a meeting in 1941, when Hitler was still extorting Jewish money that paid for some exit permits for Jews, Husaini objected. He said that Hitler should exterminate them or else they would come to Palestine. The Wannasse Conference was then held to design the "Final Solution," and simultaneously Husaini organized a comparable meeting with Arab nationalists to design the extermination of all Jews in the Arab Muslim world.

Fortunately, the Arabs chose the wrong ally.

Husaini never became a Caliph, ruling the entire Muslim (not just Arab) world. But he ruined any possibility of the Arabs (particularly the Palestinians) developing a democratic, modern society.

The connection between the Nazis and the Muslim World is alive and well, but is doomed to the same end that the Nazis earned. This is a definitive book on this very current subject.